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Opinion

Editorial Board

Publisher
Mike O'Brien

Editor
Joe Beach

Managing Editor
Carl Sampson

opinions@capitalpress.com

Online: www.capitalpress.com/opinion

OUR VIEW

Fees for crossing state trails unneeded

Washington state is in the midst of creating a solution for a problem that doesn't exist with its proposal to charge farmers a fee to cross any of its long-distance trails.

The five long-distance trails are the John Wayne Pioneer Trail between Cedar Falls and the Columbia River; Willapa Hills Trail between Chehalis and Raymond; Columbia Plateau Trail between near Cheney and near the Tri-Cities; Klickitat Trail from Lyle north and east 30 miles; and the Spokane Centennial Trail between Spokane and the Idaho border.

Because the trails were built on old railroad rights of way they often pass through farms, ranches and, in one case, a rodeo grounds. For that reason, an occasional tractor, hay windrower or other type of equipment may need to use a trail to get from one field to another.

In the past, farmers and ranchers have been responsible users of the trails. In some cases, farmers have adopted stretches of the trail and pitched in with maintenance chores.

"Allowing use of the trail for occasional farm vehicle travel in return for maintaining and

monitoring irrigation ditches, drains and structures, caring for fences, controlling weeds and respecting users and the trail environment and structures seems like a 'win-win' situation," one farmer wrote to the state Parks and Recreation Commission. "All it takes is a good working relationship between the ranger and landowner and/or operator. I saw it work to everyone's benefit for almost 20 years."

We agree.

A cursory review of the 205 public comments posted on the state parks website shows that

most of the concerns were about all-terrain vehicles and snow mobiles, not farm equipment.

Considering that, it's difficult to understand why the parks staff decided to pile on fees for farmers who occasionally use the trails. According to the proposal, there would be a \$200 application fee and a separate "processing fee" of at least \$300. In addition, the annual "use fee" could be as much as \$3,000 per mile.

We understand that trails are primarily for non-motorized use. We also understand that, in the case of farms bisected by a trail,

a farmer will occasionally have to cross the trail or use it for a short distance.

Why that occasional use, which has taken place since the time the railroads were still in operation, represents a problem, or an expense to the state, we cannot say.

We urge the state Parks and Recreation Commission to reconsider the staff's proposal to charge a fee for occasional use of the trails.

Cooperation has worked well in the past, and it can work well in the future, if the commission decides to allow it.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

OUR VIEW

Increased risk with increased access to China

Washington apple growers are hailing news that China is expected to open its market to all varieties of U.S. apples later this month.

That would be an important development. China is a country of 1.3 billion consumers with a growing middle class hungry for quality foodstuffs. Washington growers are producing increasingly larger crops and more and more depend on foreign markets. Industry representatives say China could be a \$200 million market — more than triple today's volume.

We've often touted the value of the export market to U.S. farmers. But before growers start making cropping decisions based on potential foreign sales, they need to understand the potential downsides.

China provides a perfect example.

Westerns have been trying to understand the Chinese market since the 13th century, when European merchants began making treks to the seat of the

Mongol Empire then located in what today is Beijing.

Trading in silk and spices made many rich, but many more potential fortunes were lost to the mercurial whims of the imperial officials.

That's still the case, according to modern China hands.

Desmond O'Rourke, a retired Washington State University agricultural economist, is a longtime student of the apple industry and China watcher. He says China is an "extremely unreliable" trading partner.

He noted that China halted Red and Golden Delicious apple imports for two years over disease allegations and impacted Pacific Northwest alfalfa markets when it switched to a different standard for detecting trace amounts of genetically modified hay.

"China is authoritarian and repressive with a secret power structure," he told the Capital Press. "No one quite knows how much the Chinese military and communist party influence the decisions

of the official government."

The government tailors its import strategy to favor Chinese companies, he said, and don't honor trade deals the same way other trading partners do.

Andy Anderson, executive director of the Western U.S. Agricultural Trade Association in Vancouver, agrees.

"You never know when they'll decide it's in their interests to put a hold on something or stop something," Anderson said.

With those caveats, no one says the Chinese market isn't worth pursuing. China is already our largest international market for agriculture and food products, and accounts for 20 percent of U.S. farm exports — a record \$29.9 billion in fiscal 2014.

As China's government opens access to more products, the potential for even more sales grow. But what China gives, it can take away.

U.S. producers should heed the old admonition about putting all their eggs in one basket.

Making progress for rural Oregon

By GREG WALDEN
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Greg Walden



The biggest disagreements and loudest voices got most of the attention during this last session of Congress, from filibusters to failed websites, immigration to ISIL. However, while the pundits blared, many of us worked hard to achieve important legislative wins for Oregon and America in 2014 — like boosting American energy and jobs and rooting out waste to save taxpayer dollars.

Make no mistake, we still have work to do, but we have a strong foundation to build on next year with the new Republican majority in the Senate on efforts to grow and strengthen Oregon's rural communities.

All in all, I'm proud that three bills I wrote this session — protecting rural satellite television service, providing more water and power for Central Oregon, and boosting agriculture research in Hermiston — are now the law of the land.

And several other of my initiatives passed the House with bipartisan support, including the plan to reform federal forest policy to grow jobs in the woods, improve forest health, and provide needed revenue for schools, roads and law enforcement. Although I am disappointed the Senate did not hold a vote on this plan or any forestry bill to assist our region, this gives us a strong base to build on next year with the new majority in the Senate. I've already begun conversations with members of the House and Senate from both parties on efforts to reform federal forest policy and better manage our lands. All of these initiatives were developed transparently with community support, so they will have good momentum going into 2015.

One of my top priorities is making federal agencies like the IRS, the VA and the EPA more transparent and accountable to taxpayers. I sought and secured a federal investigation into the enormous, costly failure of Cover Oregon to stop the waste, demand the truth, and get accountability. That investigation is ongoing, and we hope to get the results in the near future.

And when the FDA proposed rules that would have made it harder to grow onions and brew local beer, I pushed back hard on behalf of producers and brewers, inviting the FDA to visit with Oregon growers to witness the rules' impact firsthand. Our voices were heard as the agency reworked them to make them better for Oregon producers. I doubt most people realize how much time a member of Congress and his/her staff spend helping cut through red tape at agencies like the Social Security Administration or the VA. For me and my team, we helped more 2,811 Oregonians over the past two years, including nearly one thousand veterans' cases.

The Energy and Commerce Committee I serve on had 51 bills signed into law this session, including legislation to increase hydropower and boost

research for pediatric diseases. We launched a major initiative called 21st Century Cures to aggressively help find cures for the nearly 6,500 known diseases that lack them. This is an exciting initiative that will dramatically improve the lives of people all over the world.

The committee also conducted thorough oversight of federal agencies under our jurisdiction. When the Federal Communications Commission proposed a "study" that sought to poke their noses into America's newsrooms, the Communications and Technology panel that I chair objected strongly, leading to the agency dropping this threat to the First Amendment.

And Congress successfully passed legislation to help clean up the mess at the VA and allow more veterans to go outside the VA to access care in the communities where they live. This will really help veterans, especially in our rural communities. We also passed plans to streamline and improve job-training programs and provide needed resources to farmers to tackle drought, fire and new diseases and pests in their crops.

Getting deficit spending under control also remains a huge priority of mine. The House passed a budget that balances over the next 10 years and eventually pays off America's debt. I supported efforts to reform programs, eliminate waste and duplication and as a result we cut discretionary spending to a level below when President Obama took office.

This work doesn't always grab the headlines or dominate the chatter on Twitter, but these quiet gains improve the lives of people and help get our region and country on a better track. I could not have been as successful working on these issues without hearing from and listening to you — the people of Oregon's Second District. Just this year, I traveled more than 9,000 miles through our enormous district to hold town halls (49 in the past two years) and other community meetings. That's in addition to the thousands of telephone town hall questions, emails, letters, phone calls, Facebook messages, and tweets I've received from you and answered (more than 41,000 just this year).

As the New Year dawns, I pledge to continue to work as hard as I can to solve our problems, here at home and across the nation. I want to continue to hear from you about your ideas and priorities. This is how I develop my "to do" list to take back to Washington, D.C., each week. Please visit www.walden.house.gov to send me an email to let me know what you think should be on my plate for 2015.

Greg Walden represents Oregon's second congressional district, which covers 20 counties in southern, central and eastern Oregon.

How to prevent more port slowdowns

It's hard to say what members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union have against Agri Beef Co.

The Boise, Idaho-based beef processor reports that the ILWU's West Coast port slowdown is costing the company — and its employees — millions of dollars and has reduced its export volume by 70 percent. As a result of the lost business, the company has had to reduce employees' hours, according to the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, which surveyed the damage the union action has caused to farmers, ranchers and processors.

The region's apple, potato, hay, dairy, Christmas tree and pear industries have all been damaged. Any crop or

commodity that is shipped in a container is vulnerable to the ILWU's slowdown. Not only are late shipments costing agricultural exporters millions of dollars a week, the possibility of losing sales contracts looms large.

"We are losing \$700,000 a week in sales," Dusty Standlee, president of Standlee Hay in Eden, Idaho, told the ISDA. "The bigger problem is that we have contracts in place that are at risk of being voided by our customer because we cannot deliver."

Phrases such as "wreaking havoc," "lost business" and "canceled orders" are repeated as agricultural exporters are damaged by the ILWU-created disaster on the docks.

Sooner or later, the ILWU

will reach an agreement with the Pacific Maritime Association, whose members operate the West Coast's container terminals. The contract expired last summer, and union members began dragging their feet by way of a slowdown to demonstrate their unhappiness with the PMA.

But instead of hurting the PMA, the union is hurting agricultural exporters and other industries that import and export their goods via the ports. The results have been billions of dollars in lost business.

The National Association of Manufacturers and National Retail Federation estimate the port slowdown has cost their members \$2 billion a day.

Such damage to the nation's economy cannot be overlooked.

There is a way to prevent the union from throwing tantrums: Put the ports under the Railway Labor Act. That law bars railroad and airline unions from striking until they have gone through arbitration and mediation.

The law was passed because of the importance the railroads and the airlines have to the nation and its economy. Certainly the ports have a similar impact on the economy. It only makes sense to place them under the jurisdiction of the Railway Labor Act, too.

Members of Congress can wring their hands about the mess the current labor slowdown has made of West Coast ports, or they can pass legislation that will prevent it from ever happening again.