

Groups urge extension of looming rail safety deadline

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

Northwest agricultural organizations and lawmakers fear major shipping disruptions will result if Congress fails to extend a deadline for railroads to implement new safety technology before the end of October.

The Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008 required railroads to have GPS-based systems, called Positive Train Control, in place by the end of 2015 to automatically prevent train collisions and derailments in the event of operator error.

The Association of American Railroads, however, has a counter on its website ticking off the seconds until the end of October. That's when the railroads say they'll have to start moving forward with contingencies for shutting down many of their systems, and economic



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Union Pacific rail cars are lined up at the Pocatello rail yard. Idaho commodity groups and agricultural organizations are asking Congress to extend a deadline for railroads to make certain safety upgrades in order to avoid disruptions to moving freight.

harm would start to occur in the absence of an extension.

"Railroads just can't flip a switch at the end of December to suspend operations," said AAR spokesman Ed Greenberg.

The mandate applies to

60,000 miles of U.S. rail routes either serving commuter trains or on which certain hazardous materials are hauled. But the major railroads have threatened to shut down their entire systems if no extension is granted, irking

some extension opponents.

None of the railroads are ready to fully implement PTC, and an American Chemistry Council report estimates in the first quarter of 2016, the U.S. economy would lose \$30 billion, plus 700,000 lost jobs, after just a month without an extension.

There are hurdles to a timely resolution, including opposition to an extension by the White House and key senators, including Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who believe the railroads have dragged their feet and should be held accountable.

Greenberg emphasized the technology didn't exist when the bill was first passed, and railroads have already invested \$6 billion toward the effort.

"We're moving as quickly as we can," Greenberg said.

Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., introduced H.R. 3651 on Sept. 30 — seeking a three-year exten-

sion. Bill cosponsors include Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho; Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore.; Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore.; Rep. Suzanne Bonamici, D-Ore.; and seven California lawmakers, among others.

Terry Whiteside, a transportation analyst who represents Idaho grain organizations, said the House plans to suspend rules on the bill, allowing no amendments and approval by a two-thirds majority, to expedite its passage. The bill would then go to the Senate, where Whiteside fears there may be too little time for bill approval and conference prior to the October recess.

Whiteside anticipates an extension will ultimately be approved, but he fears Congress will "play games right to the end," and uncertainty about deliveries could lead to market chaos.

Several agricultural or-

ganizations, including Idaho Wheat Commission, Idaho Barley Commission, Idaho Grain Producers Association, Oregon Wheat Commission, Washington Association of Wheat Growers, Washington State Potato Commission and American Farm Bureau Federation, signed a letter urging Congress to quickly act on an extension.

"About a third of our wheat goes to market by rail, and the impact would be significant," said Idaho Wheat Commission Executive Director Blaine Jacobsen.

Matt Harris, with the Washington State Potato Commission, worries about disruptions to fertilizer deliveries, noting 16,000 rail cars haul 80 tons each of anhydrous ammonia for farm use each year.

"For us, it's a no-brainer," Harris said.

Judge: EPA can scrap livestock database proposal

Court ruling holds that agency lawfully withdrew proposed rule

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency didn't violate the law by scrapping a proposed national database of concentrated animal feeding operations, according to a federal judge.

In 2011, the EPA proposed requiring all CAFOs to submit information to a national database about their location, operator name, number of animals, acreage and other features.

The proposed "information rule" came as the result of a legal settlement with environmentalists over disputed Clean Water Act regulations, but EPA dropped the idea in 2012 because it decided to rely on existing data collected by states.

Livestock groups opposed the national database because they believed the EPA was exceeding its authority by requiring CAFOs to disclose information even if they don't discharge pollutants into waterways.

Critics also feared the data would be exploited by animal rights activists, who have relied on such information to sabotage livestock operations.

After the agency withdrew the information rule, several

environmental groups filed a new lawsuit claiming the EPA lacked a clear reason for ditching the proposed regulation in violation of administrative law.

U.S. District Judge Randolph Moss in Washington, D.C., has now rejected those arguments, finding that EPA wasn't legally required to make the regulation final.

It's reasonable for the EPA to instead work with state Clean Water Act administrators, even if all the information it seeks isn't uniformly available, Moss said.

"Although not perfect, existing sources may yield 'much' of the information that the agency needs. Other approaches, including the proposed information rule, are also not perfect, and may divert agency resources," he said. "So, at least for now, the EPA believes that it is sensible further to explore, to develop, and to assess existing sources, while maintaining the option of adopting a mandatory reporting requirement or other approach based on what the agency learns from its current efforts."

The environmental groups claimed that a national system was preferable to the information maintained by states because it would include data about CAFOs that don't operate under a Clean Water Act permit.

The judge discounted this argument because such operators are likely to be unaware of the reporting requirement or that it applies to them.

Idaho ranks No. 2 in West in net farm income

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho ranked No. 2 among the 11 Western states for net farm income in 2014, despite trailing the No. 3 state, Washington, significantly in total farm gate receipts.

California ranked No. 1 in both categories, with \$54 billion in total farm cash receipts and \$15.6 billion in net farm income during 2014, according to USDA Economic Research Service data that recently became available for 2014.

Washington was second with \$10 billion in total farm receipts but Idaho ranked No. 2 in net farm income in 2014, despite trailing Washington by \$1.3 billion in farm gate receipts.

Idaho farmers and ranchers brought in a total of \$8.7 billion in farm cash receipts in 2014 and had \$1.95 billion in net farm income. Washington agriculture recorded \$1.88 billion in net farm income in 2014.

Washington has more high-value crops than Idaho, but Idaho farmers' margins are better, at least in 2014, said University of Idaho agricultural economist Garth Taylor.

"They produce some very high-value crops and they have a lot more revenue but their margins aren't there when compared with what Idaho produces," he said.

UI ag economist Ben Eborn, who compiled the data, said Idaho's large hay production is another factor. Hay is actually the state's No. 1



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Corn is harvested in a field near Homedale, Idaho, Oct. 6. Idaho ranked No. 2 among the 11 Western states in 2014 for net farm income.

crop by value but only half of it gets sold, which means it doesn't get counted in cash receipts but is reflected in net farm income.

According to the data, Idaho producers spent \$2.54 billion on farm-origin inputs in 2014, while Washington farmers spent \$1.5 billion.

Washington producers spent \$1.8 billion on manufactured inputs, while Idaho's total was \$1.3 billion, and Washington farmers spent \$1.8 billion on hired labor while Idaho farmers spent \$761 million.

Washington producers spent \$2.2 billion on "other" expenses, while Idaho producers spent \$1.34 billion. Those include insurance premiums, machine hire and

custom work, marketing, storage and transportation and repairs and maintenance.

When ranking states per capita for farm gate receipts, Idaho stood alone at \$5,300, ahead of Montana (\$4,431) and Wyoming (\$3,127) and far ahead of Washington (\$1,418), California (\$1,391) and Oregon (\$1,311).

"It really puts into perspective how large Idaho is in terms of agriculture," Taylor said. "It makes you realize how big of a powerhouse agriculture is in Idaho compared to the states surrounding us."

Looking at all of this data, "It should be obvious to everybody that Idaho is the leader in the Western states when it comes to agriculture,

not including California," Eborn said. "It's good for people to understand that."

In terms of cash receipts, Colorado ranked fourth in the West with \$7.5 billion in 2014 and was followed by Oregon (\$5.2 billion), Montana (\$4.54 billion) Arizona (\$4.4 billion), New Mexico (\$3.67 billion), Utah (\$2.38 billion), Wyoming (\$1.83 billion) and Nevada (\$870 million).

In net farm income, New Mexico was fourth with \$1.18 billion and was followed by Colorado (\$1.13 billion), Arizona (\$810 million), Oregon (\$780 million), Montana (\$720 million), Utah (\$550 million), Wyoming (\$320 million) and Nevada (\$180 million).

Rice growers midway through drought-diminished harvest

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

WILLIAMS, Calif. — Rice growers in California are midway through a harvest that will be shorter than usual for the many who fallowed portions of their acreage because of the drought.

Growers report decent yields and quality from the rice that's in the ground — plantings they say total roughly 370,000 acres statewide, a steep drop from the 431,000 acres of rice harvested last year.

Among those already winding down their harvests is Leo LaGrande, a Williams area farmer who left one-quarter of his land bare.

"It's probably going to be a short season for everyone," LaGrande said. "A lot of acreage was left out because of water cutbacks."

California rice growers are expected to produce 34.1 million hundredweight, down 8 percent from last year, the National Agricultural Statistics Service predicts. The yield forecast was 6,300 pounds per acre, down 3 percent from 2014.

Rice was one of several field crops in California showing sharp acreage declines because of the drought, according to NASS. Harvested acreage of corn in the Golden State is estimated at 65,000,



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Worker Virgilio Chavez harvests rice in a field just east of Willows, Calif., on Oct. 12. California's rice acreage is diminished this year because of the drought, but growers say they're seeing decent yields and quality from the rice that was planted.

down 32 percent from a year ago, NASS reported.

Early this spring, farmers told the agency they'd be seeding rice on 408,000 acres, but an updated field crop report in July estimated that rice acreage in California would top out at 385,000.

Water availability for growers has varied widely. Some irrigation districts will have water available until Nov. 1, while others have had their diversions curtailed, leaving some water users to rely more heavily on groundwater where it is available, the California Farm Bureau Federation reported.

Marysville area grower Charley Mathews had enough water this year to plant all his fields, and he said his yields have been good.

"I'm about halfway" through harvest, said Mathews, a member of the USA Rice Federation's executive committee. "There's a few (growers) finishing, but there's still quite a bit out there."

Willows, Calif., grower Larry Maben also managed to get all of his fields planted, he said.

"Most of the people around here had to leave some out," Maben said. "A lot of people have already finished with harvest, and a lot are close to being finished. I'm a little over halfway. ... We're progressing."

"Most of the people are saying they've got a really good crop," he said. "To me it looks like it's a little bit off. It's just the variability."

Water shortages will likely diminish migratory bird habitat this winter, as ducks and other species typically rest on water that's been put on fields for crop decomposition, the state Farm Bureau notes. While California farmers typically create about 300,000 acres of managed wetlands, last year they created only about 100,000 acres and this year it could be as low as 50,000, according to the CFBF.

Last year, favorable yields and more widespread sales of rice straw for animal feed and erosion control helped offset losses of acres for growers, but many are hoping that prices for rice improve in the coming months so they can continue to make ends meet.

"It's going to be an interesting year to see how the market responds," LaGrande said. "If the market responds to less acres, the price would hedge to the north, but there are driving factors keeping it down. There's competition from the South and world supplies are up. It's going to be a challenge."

"If the price can't move ... what you're going to see from the banks next year is a request of more skin in the game from everyone," he said. "The margins to start with aren't big. It's going to get tougher, there's no doubt about it."

WSU presidential search chairman tries to assuage ag concerns

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Agricultural groups have expressed concerns that their voice has been minimized in the search for a new Washington State University president, but the chairman of the search committee says the industry will remain a primary consideration.

Representatives of the Washington Grain Commission, Washington Apple Commission, Washington Potato Commission, Washington State Tree Fruit Association and other organizations have expressed concern that only one person on the 25-member advisory committee has a direct tie to agriculture.

Entomology professor Richard Zack represents WSU's College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences on the committee.

Michael Worthy, chairman of the presidential search advisory committee and a WSU regent, said members were selected to give a balanced view of candidates, not to advocate for their particular area.

Worthy said agriculture is well-represented by various members of the board of re-

gents, including Harold Cochrane, a Walla Walla, Wash., wheat farmer, and Theodore Baseler, president and CEO of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates. Interim WSU president Dan Bernardo and interim provost Ron Mittelhammer, former dean and interim dean of CAHNRS, will consult directly with the search consultant.

"There's no doubt in our mind that CAHNRS will be prominently represented in the discussions around how to frame the job," Worthy said. "In all of the conversations we've had about necessary characteristics of the next president of WSU, an understanding of our land-grant mission and responsibility is at the top of the list."

A letter sent by the presidents of the apple commission, tree fruit association, Washington State Fruit Commission and Northwest Horticultural Council urges WSU to make an understanding of agriculture a requirement for the new president.

The letter highlights the economic impact of their industry and highlights a total of \$32 million donated to WSU by apple, pear, cherry and stone fruit growers in 2011 and 2013.