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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Washington court slams door on public's right to know

That slam you just heard from the Washington Supreme Court was the door closing as the justices provided a legal way for the legislature and every public body to avoid public scrutiny as they carry out the public's business.

In its decision the court has essentially rolled back the sunshine law that the Legislature wrote in 1971 to pre-Watergate days. That's when much of the public's business took place behind closed doors. Decisions were often only announced in open session as a done deal.

Now Washington citizens have been informed that their interests are secondary to those of public

officials that spend public money and set public policy. The public gets to pay the cost of closed government but cannot observe and participate.

The public's interest has now taken a back seat to the convenience of those public officials, who can now simply set up an advisory committee to deliberate on issues while avoiding public scrutiny or input.

The case the high court decided was centered on the San Juan County Council's decision to set up an advisory group on the critical areas ordinance.

Several members of the council, county officials and other bigwigs were invited to discuss

the ordinance, which, among other things, governs when and where economic activities such as farming can take place.

The majority of supreme court justices determined that the county administrator's secret advisory group — the members weren't even publicly announced — was OK because the council didn't set it up, it didn't act on the behalf of the council and a majority of the council didn't belong to it.

Talk about rose-colored glasses. The justices have just accepted excuses, not reasons, that the committee should be secret.

But a minority of the court got it right.

In her minority opinion, Justice Mary Yu reminded the court of the reason the Open Public Meetings Act exists.

"Nothing about the (Open Public Meetings Act) endorses the view that informality is an adequate substitute for open government," she wrote. "This lack of documentation and institutional amnesia only emphasized the importance of public oversight under the (open meetings law.)"

With the proliferation of advisory groups at all levels of government in most states, we find the Washington Supreme Court decision to be one more blow to the public's right to know. The

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife has closed some meetings of its wolf advisory group, and with this ruling will be able to close them with impunity.

Time was, the courts would stand up for the public and open wide the doors of government. Nowadays, they just go along with the latest trends in secrecy.

We wondered why this would be. Why would a court decide against the public's right to know?

Then we saw it. The Washington Supreme Court has its own advisory group, which it created as part of the Washington State Center for Court Research.

No further explanation required.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

OUR VIEW

TPP has positives, but questions remain

The Trans-Pacific Partnership, a big multi-nation trade pact, has been negotiated and within the month will begin a long process of ratification by member countries.

The agreement — known by its initials TPP — is designed to improve trade relations between the 12 participating countries, including the United States, Japan, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Vietnam, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.

We are for trade. It's the lifeblood of American farmers and ranchers, particularly those in the Northwest. Anything that facilitates the opening of markets abroad is probably good.

In a teleconference with reporters, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack touted these among the benefits of the pact:

- TPP eliminates or reduces tariffs or taxes assessed by other countries on U.S. agricultural products, including beef, pork, poultry, dairy, horticulture, rice, grains, soybeans, wheat, cotton and processed products.

- The agreement includes safeguards to protect U.S. markets from other

countries essentially dumping product into the country.

- TPP gives the United States an additional opportunity to contest sanitary and phytosanitary standards that are not based on risk or science.

- Beef and pork producers will see reductions in taxes levied by Japan on their products. The deal expands the market for dairy products such as cheese and yogurt in Japan and Canada.

So, painted with a broad brush the deal sounds good for American agriculture. That said, this is a complex treaty with a lot of moving parts. The devil may well be hiding in the details that have yet to be made public.

Critics are concerned with portions of the pact that deal with intellectual property, the Internet and dispute resolution.

Opponents worry that one common component of recent trade agreements, known as "investor-state dispute settlement," will allow big, multi-national corporations at odds with American laws to bypass U.S. courts in favor of an expert panel of arbitrators.

Where once such a provision made sense when companies didn't want to

risk the third-world judicial system, opponents point out that most if not all participants of the TPP have stable, established legal systems.

Critics say the deal includes provisions that could severely restrict the Internet and remove "fair use" protections for use of copyrighted material. Labor unions oppose the deal because they say it will move more American jobs overseas.

Although alleged drafts of the deal have been posted to Wikileaks, we probably won't get official copies for another 30 days, after Congress has reviewed the pact. The public will then get 60 days to pore over the terms.

Congress gave President Obama "fast track" authority in negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership. As such, it can only give the deal an up or down vote, and it can't amend it. So, weighing the relative benefits and potential harms of those details is all the more important.

Without benefit of a complete text, the deal appears to us to be positive for U.S. farmers and ranchers. We are for trade, but not for a deal for a deal's sake. We await a vigorous debate.

Ag technology on the rise in rural America

By JESSICA WHARTON
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Jessica Wharton



Farmers and ranchers today have access to new agriculture technologies that were once simply a sci-fi dream — drones soaring across corn fields, genetically modified crops growing with fewer pesticides and real-time soil monitoring. Technology and innovation are the future of farming and the American Farm Bureau Federation is working to help rural entrepreneurs pave the way.

The 2016 Farm Bureau Rural Entrepreneurship Challenge, now in its second year, provides opportunities for individuals to showcase business innovations being developed in rural regions of the U.S. This year, four of the top 10 finalists are working to develop new ag technologies.

"It's exciting to see so many ag technologies advancing in the competition," said Lisa Benson, AFBF's director of rural development. "Through the Farm Bureau Rural Entrepreneurship Challenge we hope to address competitors' startup concerns and encourage a spirit of innovation in the years to come."

AgriSync, one of the final four in the competition, developed the first mobile customer support platform built from the ground up for the agriculture industry. The app allows farmers to have one-touch access to trusted advisors who can provide real-time support and services. Located in Dallas Center, Iowa, AgriSync is working to affordably connect isolated communities with consistent results that reduce downtime in the field.

Farm Specific Technology (FarmSpec) is another final four team and has developed a no-till crimper for crop production. FarmSpec's primary objective is to introduce other innovative technologies, along with the no-till crimper, to efficiently improve the sustainability of global food systems and create new opportunities for growers across rural America.

AccuGrain, another final

four team, is comprised of Iowa State students who are aiming to solve age-old problems inherent with grain measurement technology. The company developed X-ray technology to revolutionize the way the grain industry inventories and measures flowing grain in real time, saving time and providing solutions for farmers and the commercial grain industry.

Strategic Management of Agriculture Related Technologies, or S.M.A.R.T., a semi-finalist team, is working to develop water conservation systems for farms and ranches.

AgriSync, Farm Specific Technology and AccuGrain, along with the fourth finalist, a non ag technology team, will have the opportunity to pitch their ag technology business ideas to a team of judges in front of a live audience at AFBF's 97th Annual Convention and IDEAg Trade Show in January in hopes of winning the Rural Entrepreneur of the Year Award and the People's Choice Award, for a potential total of \$40,000 to implement their business ideas.

"The 10 businesses recognized are an outstanding group of entrepreneurs," said AFBF President Bob Stallman. "Rural entrepreneurs typically face unique challenges including limited options for support with resources such as startup funding, which we aim to address through the challenge," he continued.

The future of farming is rapidly developing and with innovators and programs like the Farm Bureau Rural Entrepreneurship Challenge, ag technology is no longer simply a sci-fi dream.

To learn more about AFBF's Rural Development programs visit www.fb.org/programs/ruraldevelopment/.

Jessica Wharton is a communications assistant at the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Readers' views

Groups want people off the land

It has been painfully clear that the environmental community — the Nature Conservancy, Natural Desert Association, Oregon Habitat Joint Venture and Sierra Club, among others — want nothing more than to eliminate private landowners and public land users.

As was the case in Bill Clinton's presidency with Bruce Babbitt as secretary of the Interior, when with a stroke of the pen logging, the lifeblood of many rural communities, was either destroyed or so badly wounded it never recovered, the northern spotted owl being

the scapegoat. This was to save them from extinction when in reality they were not threatened. Now it's the sage grouse that has the spotlight for being in need of saving.

These groups and their memberships contribute nothing to the economies of rural areas they are destroying. In Oregon the big open spaces are deemed the playgrounds for these groups and if survival of these areas were up to them, they would be destroyed even more quickly than is presently happening.

Their objective in gaining control of the land is in their infinite wisdom to eliminate its use for domestic livestock and return it to

nature. They turn deaf ears when knowledgeable people point out to them that their idea of protecting the land would eventually kill off the desirable native forage to be replaced by brush, junipers, etc. along with adding more fuel for wildfires. This is now the case in the forests that have been sadly neglected since logging stopped.

Those who have chosen to make a living from the land, private and public, are good stewards; if not they would be destroying their means of livelihood. Along with domestic livestock they are providing for wildlife by keeping the forage desirable through utilization, providing increased

watering sources, etc. The sage grouse are included beneficiaries, their biggest gain is domestic livestock keeping forage at manageable levels, not overgrown fire hazard material.

Let us hope that someday before it's too late to salvage agricultural enterprises, these self-appointed save-the-world groups will wake up and realize they should leave the land and natural resources in the hands of those who will care for it knowledgeably while continuing to fulfill their role in the food chain business.

You people growing up on farms and ranches need to be encouraged to stay in the business they know

best. Rural America should not be at the mercy of those who would destroy it.

Betty Morgan
Burns, Ore.

Muslim immigrants must be screened

Isn't it funny that the U.S. takes on Islam's immigration but is resistant to Mexicans immigrating. Most Mexicans are Christians. Muslims can be peaceful or not. They will only abide by the Koran law, which means they will only operate on their law rather than the U.S. Constitution.

Saudi Arabia does not want Muslims as immi-

grants. National reports say all countries should let them in.

Because of our democracy, this would give Muslims the power to override our democracy by sheer numbers. With six wives and procreation, they would rapidly multiply.

This is happening in Belgium, Holland and Greece. With the threat of terrorism, we must screen out those who may be a threat to our nation. Only those who speak English and would abide by our constitution should be considered.

I say we must resist mass infiltration.

Darryl Ehlers
Lynden, Wash.