

Wash. senator named special assistant to ag secretary

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A Republican state senator from northeastern Washington has resigned from the Legislature to become a special assistant to the U.S. agriculture secretary.

Brian Dassel, a resident of Republic in rural Ferry County, announced his resignation and new job in a press release Tuesday.

"It is no secret that I think we could be moving more timber off the forests, while putting people back to work and reducing our susceptibility to wildfires," he said in a written statement. "I think we also need to reform regulations that have

prevented mining companies from exploratory drilling, rendering the mining industry nearly obsolete when it has been an iconic industry in northeast Washington for many decades."

Dassel, 33, did not detail his duties as special assistant. Efforts to reach him Tuesday afternoon were not successful. He will begin his duties in Washington, D.C., immediately, according to the press release.

President Donald Trump has nominated former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue for agriculture secretary.

Dassel was elected Ferry County commissioner in 2010. He won a special election in 2013 to represent the



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Washington state Sen. Brian Dassel, R-Republic, has resigned from the Legislature to become special assistant to the U.S. agriculture secretary.

7th District, which has most of the state's wolves. Dassel has been a vocal supporter

of taking wolves off the state protected species list in the eastern part of Washington.

"It has been the honor of my life to serve as your senator, and this decision was not an easy one for me," Dassel said.

Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler congratulated Dassel.

"The 7th Legislative District, which Sen. Dassel represents, is heavily affected by agriculture policies, so we know it's a policy area that he cares deeply about. It's good to see Washington state getting a seat at the table in the new administration," said Schoesler, R-Ritzville.

Republican precinct committee officers in the 7th District will nominate three candidates to replace Dassel.

Commissioners from Okanogan, Ferry, Stevens, Pend Oreille and Spokane counties will pick from the three.

Republicans will need to have the seat filled to retain a majority in the Senate.

Senate Republicans said they hope the commissioners will meet by Feb. 6 to select the new senator, sooner if possible.

Another Republican senator, Doug Erickson of Ferndale, is dividing time between the Senate and a temporary position with the Environmental Protection Agency. Erickson has been named the communications director for Trump's regional transition team.



John O'Connell/Capital Press

National Potato Council Executive Vice President and CEO John Keeling speaks about the ramifications of Donald Trump's presidency on the U.S. potato industry Jan. 18 during the 49th annual Potato Conference in Pocatello.

National potato leader voices optimism about Trump

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — A top national potato leader is optimistic Donald Trump's presidency will be good news for his industry.

National Potato Council Executive Vice President and CEO John Keeling spoke Jan. 18 on the Idaho State University campus during the 47th annual Potato Conference.

On immigration, Keeling said NPC supports a foreign guestworker program "that works," as well as a change in legal status that would enable agriculture to retain undocumented foreign workers who are "here doing the work now."

"It would shock me given the understanding Trump has of the hospitality industry if we don't do something," Keeling said. "He understands who changes the beds in his hotels and who buses the tables in his restaurants."

Keeling said 20 percent of U.S. potatoes are exported, and NPC will "push the concept of trade and the value of trade." Despite comments Trump has made about many of the major U.S. trade agreements not being in the country's best interests, Keeling predicts U.S. foreign exports will continue to grow under the new administration.

Keeling supports being "tougher on trade partners," and he predicts rather than starting from scratch with trade agreements, Trump will change them slightly.

"He is the king of re-branding," Keeling said.

Keeling believes Trump's vision for the Environmental Protection Agency should be much more in line with potato growers' priorities than under President Barack Obama.

"There's not a single agency of all of them where the turn-around in direction, philosophy and everything else will be bigger than with the EPA," Keeling said.

Keeling believes Trump's pick to head EPA, Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt, will place a higher premium on states making environmental decisions. He said having "an EPA that works" is vital to ensuring agricultural chemicals are approved in a timely manner. He believes Obama's EPA too often based decisions on epidemiological data — relying on patterns and apparent correlations — even when it was inconsistent with scientific data.

Keeling argues there was no scientific justification for EPA's controversial choice to expand Clean Water Act regulation to "cover every drainage area that might be wet once every two years," and he expects that policy will be reversed within Trump's first 90 days in office.

Keeling was also critical of shortened EPA public comment periods.

Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir is encouraged by comments Trump made about the Idaho potato industry. In a video shown at the Expo, Muir included a clip of Trump saying, "Obviously, I love Idaho potatoes. Who doesn't love potatoes from Idaho?"

Potato pathologist warns of future disease threats

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — A leading potato pathologist warns restrictions on soil fumigants may lead to greater problems with certain diseases and a reemergence of some pathogens that are now under control.

North Dakota State University professor Neil Gudmestad also predicted during the University of Idaho's recent 49th annual Potato Conference soil-borne genotypes of diseases that now need living tissue to survive will eventually move into the U.S.

Gudmestad said there are about 150 diseases affecting potatoes, 40 of which are economically important. He said the industry faces a new pathogen about every 5.7 years. One of the most recent threats is *Dickeya dianthicola*, a bacterial disease that causes poor plant emergence, discolored internal stem tissue and black stems extending from rotting seed pieces. Though *dianthicola* now has the industry's attention, Gudmestad warned a more aggressive type of the disease that can survive in soil, *Dickeya solani*, is found in Europe, and he anticipates it will eventually take hold in the U.S.

"When *solani* gets here, trust me, we won't even care about *dianthicola*," Gudmestad said.

Gudmestad also has con-



John O'Connell/Capital Press

North Dakota State University potato pathologist Neil Gudmestad discusses potato diseases following a presentation at the University of Idaho's 49th annual Potato Conference in Pocatello on Jan. 18.

cerns about the future emergence of soil-borne strains of late blight, a devastating fungal pathogen. Sexually reproducing populations of late blight producing oospores that survive for up to seven years in soil have already surfaced in the Netherlands.

"This could perhaps cause an entire paradigm shift in late blight management," Gudmestad said.

In the U.S., sexually reproducing late blight populations have surfaced in New York, Colorado, California and Texas, but none of them have survived in soil.

Gudmestad is also con-

cerned the EPA is increasingly targeting carbamate nematicides, such as Vydate, and a lack of good alternatives could make nematodes difficult to control. He fears poor management of the root lesion nematode will exacerbate challenges with verticillium wilt, which causes plants to die early.

Tobacco rattle virus, which is now under control, is also vectored by nematodes and threatens to reappear if fumigants are lost, he said.

Gudmestad warns potato moptop virus could also re-emerge as a disease threat, and potato wart, found in a region

of Canada that sells a lot of seed to the U.S., could enter the country. He said pale cyst nematode, now found only in a small region of Idaho within the U.S., could be detected elsewhere in the country, and potato spindle tuber may also resurface, because the industry has stopped testing for the disease.

On the bright side, Gudmestad said drone technology, improved breeding methods, biotechnology, the growing use of site-specific field treatments and commercial acceptance of more disease-resistant varieties bode well for the industry.

Scottish expert describes challenges of PCN infestation

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS — Many farmers in Scotland plant potatoes less often than they once did and anticipate a 10 percent yield loss because of the spread of potato cyst nematodes, that nation's chief nematologist says.

Jon Pickup shared his country's PCN woes during a public meeting to underscore the importance of Idaho's efforts to eradicate the destructive microscopic worms from a roughly 5-square-mile quarantine area of Bingham and Bonneville counties.

"You don't want the situation we've got in Europe," Pickup said. "Pale cyst nematode is spreading and severely limiting our ability to produce potatoes in the United Kingdom, and it will continue to do that until we have more resistant (potato) varieties and those resistant varieties are accepted by the market."



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Jon Pickup, chief nematologist for Scotland, shares his country's experience with potato cyst nematodes during a Jan. 20 meeting about Idaho's PCN program in Idaho Falls.

Officials at the Jan. 20 meeting said they're optimistic about Idaho's outlook based on testing of new PCN treatment methods to replace methyl bromide, a chemical the program abandoned two years ago due to residual levels found in subsequent crops.

Pickup, who participated in an international science review of the U.S. and Canadian PCN management programs, admits he was initially skeptical the outbreak could be contained when Idaho discovered pale cyst nematode in 2007. Pickup now describes Idaho's program as a "remarkable success," though he encourages the spud industry to test for PCN in its other major potato production areas, especially in seed, to keep the pest in check.

Pickup said that thanks to good seed program controls, PCN is limited to 30 percent of Scotland's production area, but it's spreading quickly, and more resistant varieties are needed.

PCN is the major pest of concern in Scotland and has forced seed growers to expand to six-year potato rotations, he said. Scottish growers who raise spuds for supermarkets that prohibit nematicide use sometimes plant on eight- to

10-year rotations, he said. He said a pale cyst nematode-resistant spud called Innovator has become the most popular global variety.

Tina Gresham, director of the PCN program for USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, has been seeking to build grower support for expanding use of litchi tomato as a trap crop — a plant that stimulates cysts to hatch but isn't a viable host. Gresham said the program planted litchi tomato on a commercial field with a low PCN infestation during 2015 and 2016 and found no traces of the pest following both seasons.

"That's the best news I've heard about litchi tomato," said Shelley grower Steve Christensen, who has a regulated field that now has no detectable PCN and is eligible to be replanted to potatoes. "I see it more so now as a possible, very effective tool."

Committee turns to state for help on groundwater nitrates

By GEORGE PLAVERN
EO Media Group

A volunteer committee grappling with groundwater contamination in the Lower Umatilla Basin is reaching out to the state for additional help.

The Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area, or LUBGWMA, was declared in 1990 due to elevated levels of nitrates in groundwater. Nitrates come from a variety of sources, though the primary culprit is fertilizer, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The advisory committee is charged with writing a new action plan designed to curb the level of groundwater nitrates in the area, which spans 550 square miles and encompasses six communities in Umatilla and Morrow counties: Hermiston, Stanfield, Echo, Umatilla, Boardman and Irrigon.

The committee reached out to Oregon Solutions in October, a program that serves at the pleasure of the governor's office to leverage state resources for local projects. On Monday, Oregon Solutions staff met with the com-

mittee in Hermiston and said they hoped to finish assessing the group's proposal by next month.

Pete Dalke, senior project manager for Oregon Solutions, said they are trying to get more specific feedback from committee members, such as major issues posed by groundwater nitrates and the urgency to address the situation immediately.

"It's hard for us to engage if there isn't some driver, or some timeline," Dalke said. "You've got to help us with what we need to bring to you to help you move forward."

Tamra Mabbott, Umatilla County planning director, said the groundwater management area is affecting economic development by preventing some businesses from building or expanding.

"There are businesses that want to come in that can't locate here, even if they have enough water, because of limitations of land application of wastewater," Mabbott said. "I think there's a whole host of things that would warrant Oregon Solutions, if they could help the group."

Oregon's Groundwater Protection Act requires DEQ

to declare a groundwater management area if contamination exceeds certain levels. In the case of nitrates, the trigger is 7 milligrams per liter, or 70 percent of the federal drinking water standard.

The Lower Umatilla Basin came to exceed that mark through a number of different land uses, though DEQ says an overwhelming majority of those leached nitrates — 81.6 percent — come from the region's vast irrigated farms. Pastures make up 8.1 percent, and food processors account for 4.6 percent.

An action plan was devel-

oped in 1997 with voluntary actions to reduce nitrates, though after 20 years the results have been mixed. DEQ data shows nitrates are still increasing overall in the basin, though not as sharply as in years past.

The LUBGWMA committee is now working on a second action plan, which chairman Clive Kaiser is nearly ready for peer review. Kaiser, an extension horticulturist for Oregon State University in Milton-Freewater, said he feels Oregon Solutions could help them put their plan into action.