

Oregon

‘Right to farm’ law among targets in Oregon Legislature

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Agribusiness groups have cheered the Trump administration’s vow to roll back federal regulations but they continue to fear overreach by the state government in Oregon.

With Democrats controlling the Oregon Legislature and the governor’s office, farm lobbyists said they expect new threats to emerge during the 2017 legislative session.

Despite optimism at the national level, the political climate in Oregon “sucks some of the air out of the room,” said Katie Fast, executive director of the Oregonians for Food and Shelter agribusiness group.

Though Republicans



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File
Katie Fast, left, executive director of the Oregonians for Food and Shelter agribusiness group, speaks with Jenny Dresler of the Oregon Farm Bureau about the legislative session.

picked up one seat in the state Senate during last year’s election, they’re still a minority in both legislative chambers and several moderate-leaning Democrats have left their positions, Fast said during the

2017 Ag Summit, organized by the Dunn Carney law firm.

One proposal to be considered during the upcoming legislative session, Senate Bill 499, would remove protections for pesticide usage from

the state’s “Right to Farm and Forest Law,” which prohibits lawsuits and local ordinances against common farming practices, she said.

“It’s a big attack on the whole program,” said Fast.

Another piece of legislation — House Bill 2469 — would effectively allow Josephine County to ban genetically engineered crops, she said. State law pre-empts local governments from regulating such crops, but includes an exception for Jackson County.

Lawmakers will also be asked to consider Senate Bill 500, which removes the requirement that people notify the Oregon Department of Agriculture before filing lawsuits that allege damage from pesticides, Fast said.

Though bills have yet to

be introduced, Oregonians for Food and Shelter also expects legislation that would impose new notification requirements for pesticide spraying as well as restrictions on neonicotinoid insecticides, she said.

Labor advocates succeeded in getting paid sick leave and minimum wage increases passed during recent legislative sessions, and will turn their aim to new policy proposals in 2017, said Jenny Dresler, state public policy director for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

Under House Bill 2193, for example, large employers would have to provide “predictable scheduling” under which workers would be paid “penalty wages” if their shifts change with less than two weeks’ notice.

While smaller-scale em-

ployers wouldn’t be subject to the requirement, their workers would have the right to offer input on their work schedules under the bill.

It’s also likely that labor advocates will propose a 1 percent payroll tax to pay for a statewide family and medical leave policy for workers, Dresler said.

Farms and other businesses will be pushing for transportation funding that would alleviate congestion and reduce the time their products get to market, said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

However, there may not be “enough oxygen” for such a proposal given the need to fill the state’s \$1.7 billion budget hole, Stone said. “You may not be able to get both.”

Wallowa County ranch to adopt new water conservation practices

Flows to benefit both farm and fish

By GEORGE PLAVERN
EO Media Group

A Wallowa County ranch figures to save 1 billion gallons of water annually through a series of conservation projects, such as adding sprinklers and forgoing irrigation during peak summer months.

The Freshwater Trust, an environmental nonprofit with offices in Portland, announced it is working with Wolfe Ranch to upgrade irrigation infrastructure, transfer points of diversion and lease water rights on the farm to benefit endangered salmon in the Lostine River.

Funding comes from a \$1.4 million grant awarded by the Oregon Water Resources Department. Irrigation upgrades are also expected to boost crop yields by 5 to 20 percent on the ranch.



Courtesy photo by Leon Werdinger
The confluence of the Lostine and Wallowa rivers in Oregon’s Wallowa Valley.

“We’ve formed lasting relationships with dozens of farmers and ranchers who understand conservation isn’t just about protecting fish,” said Aaron Maxwell, flow restoration project manager for The Freshwater Trust, who works

in Enterprise. “It’s about the longevity of their farms, economies and entire communities.”

Nearly 1,100 acres of forage and grain crops will be converted to pivot sprinklers as opposed to flood irrigation

at the ranch — which Maxwell compared to the difference between letting your hose run into the yard, or watering just the section that needs it most.

“In the face of present and future water scarcity, modernizations like this will only

become more imperative,” he said.

Ditching flood irrigation may also have a positive effect on water quality, Maxwell said, reducing the amount of standing water in fields that can become contaminated with sediment, bacteria and toxins before draining back into streams.

Water saved through the irrigation upgrades will be transferred back into the Lostine River, which harbors summer chinook and steelhead populations. Wolfe Ranch will also voluntarily abstain from irrigating in August and September, when the river reaches critically low water levels.

The changes may allow Wolfe Ranch, a sixth-generation family operation, to begin growing more high-value food crops, which could have a ripple effect down the entire Wallowa County agricultural industry. Local businesses are already slated to provide approximately \$2 million in con-

struction materials and labor.

“Production and economics must always be taken into consideration with projects like these,” Maxwell said. “This will have positive implications for the landowner and the local economy.”

The Freshwater Trust has been working with farms and ranches on the Lostine River for more than a decade, Maxwell said, after chinook runs were nearly wiped out in the 1990s. The organization was also awarded \$114,265 from the Water Resources Department last year to study whether irrigation efficiencies could help protect salmon on upper Catherine Creek in Union County.

Woody Wolfe, owner of Wolfe Ranch, said water scarcity and quality issues aren’t going to simply go away.

“Projects like this help further the responsible use of our natural resources while benefiting the environment,” Wolfe said.

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