

# Idaho's job growth causes farm labor crunch

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

AMERICAN FALLS, Idaho — Most springs, about 30 people stop by Koompin Farms to add their names to a waiting list for work.

This season, however, the Koompins — who would pass along extra names from the list to other area farmers — had just a third of the usual interest. Furthermore, most of the applicants sought full-time employment, while the Koompins were looking to make seasonal hires.

The tight labor supply is a familiar story on farms throughout Idaho, the leading state in job growth for six consecutive months.

Tax data and employer surveys show state wag-



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Workers sort seed potato pieces at Koompin Farms in American Falls, Idaho, on March 27. The farm has had far fewer temporary workers apply for jobs this season as Idaho's economy leads the nation in creating new jobs.

es have begun to creep up, said Bob Uhlenkott, a research officer with the Idaho

Department of Labor. The state's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate held

steady at 3.6 percent during February — within the range considered full employment by IDL. Gains in manufacturing and construction led job growth, as 2,100 workers joined the state's labor force in February.

"Lower skilled jobs are going to be the jobs under the most pressure when you have any kind of workforce shortage," Uhlenkott said, adding the workforce crunch could inhibit additional economic growth.

In his 2016 studies on Idaho agricultural production costs, University of Idaho Extension economist Ben Eborn estimated farm labor costs rose by 3.5 percent.

"In 2017, I'm sure they're going to go up by at least 3 percent, and maybe more be-

cause of the shortage," Eborn said. "Most producers right now have pretty tight margins as it is."

To remain competitive, Kamren Koompin, whose workers recently began cutting seed potatoes, said his family offered returning employees a 5 percent raise. They boosted wages for first-time hires by 10 percent. Koompin has also noticed more advertisements for labor from farmers fulfilling a requirement to check locally before hiring foreign temporary workers through the H-2A visa program.

Bill Lasley, a Power County Commissioner who works as human resources director with Driscoll Brothers Partnership, said H-2A workers have been part of

the solution for his employer, and represent an increasingly popular option within the community. At their fresh potato shed, the Driscolls are also installing a robotic system to package potatoes in pallets, which should eliminate the need for about 15 employees.

Michael Williamson, who raises fruit and winegrapes in Caldwell, sought to hire a dozen workers earlier this year, but had to settle for half that many.

"We couldn't hire them," Williamson said. "They were wanting more money than we were willing to pay."

Williamson expects to hire his first H-2A workers this season and plans to partner with another grower to share laborers.

## Bill relaxing Oregon land use rules survives deadline

### Rural development legislation faces short deadline for work session

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

SALEM — A bill that would relax restrictions on development in Oregon's slow-growing rural areas has survived a legislative deadline that recently killed several similar proposals.

Under Senate Bill 432, local governments could create land use plans without complying with statewide goals as long as they're in counties with fewer than 50,000 people that haven't grown since the previous federal census.

A work session on the bill before the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources has been scheduled for April 17, which means lawmakers can continue deliberating on the proposal.

Four other bills that would have given local governments more flexibility under Oregon land use rules — Senate bills 602, 608, 612 and 618 — have died because no work session was scheduled for them by April 7.

Because SB 432 only applies to low-population areas with no growth, it would effectively only affect eight Oregon counties: Baker, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Malheur, Sherman, Wallowa and Wheeler.

These counties have lost significant numbers of people, which threatens the viability of schools, hospitals and law enforcement agencies, said Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, the bill's chief sponsor, during a recent legislative hearing.

"The social infrastructure is really what's unraveled in these communities," he said.

Washington has exempted 10 rural counties from its land use system and they're performing better economically than comparable counties in Oregon, which have struggled for decades, Ferrioli said.

"It worked there, it can probably work here. We just need the courage to give it a try," he said.

Any development in Oregon's most rural counties would still be constrained by available water, power and soils suitable for septic tanks, said Gary Thompson, the Sherman County judge

"That will eliminate 90 percent of the land available in the county," he said.

Proponents of the bill argued that rural counties in Eastern Oregon face a completely different situation than those where expansion of urban growth boundaries can't keep up with housing demand.

It's unlikely that counties with low or negative population growth will succumb to urban sprawl, but existing rules prevent the possibility of new development, according to supporters.

The economic stagnation in these areas is self-reinforcing, since local governments cannot expand urban growth boundaries unless they can forecast population growth, said Erin Doyle, lobbyist for the League of Oregon Cities.

"Tell me what you're supposed to do. You can't say you need more housing because you're not having more people coming in," she said.

Opponents of SB 432 claim that a lack of land isn't really what's hindering development, which is actually stymied by a lack of transportation and other infrastructure.

It's true that land within urban growth boundaries is more expensive, said Peggy Lynch, natural resources coordinator for the League of Women Voters of Oregon.

"The reason is there are services inside," she said.

The five bills propose a "false promise" of easily spurring economic development, but lawmakers would be better off investing in adding value to Oregon's agriculture industry, said Mary Kyle McCurdy, deputy director of 1,000 Friends of Oregon, a nonprofit that supports farmland preservation.

deadlines for action as regular committees.

Proponents of HB 2705 argue the measuring requirement is necessary for the Oregon Water Resources Department to effectively manage the state's 89,000 water rights.

Farm and irrigator groups are opposed to the bill, arguing that water devices will be expensive to install and will overwhelm OWRD with data that it lacks the resources to analyze.

The committee delayed taking action on two other measures related to water: House Bill 2706, which imposes a \$100 annual fee on all water rights, and HB 2707, which appropriates an unspecified amount of money for additional groundwater studies.

A work session on those two bills was rescheduled for April 12.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Oregon State University honeybee research and professor Ramesh Sagili, suited up in this 2014 photo, was recently honored for his work by the Pacific branch of the Entomological Society of America.

## Entomological group honors Oregon State bee researcher

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press

Ramesh Sagili, an Oregon State University assistant professor who studies honeybee health, was honored for his work during the annual meeting of the Pacific branch of the Entomological Society of America.

Sagili won an award for his work on insect physiology, biochemistry and toxicology. A dozen other West Coast scientists also received awards during the ESA's gathering in Portland the first week of April.

Sagili is an assistant professor and Extension specialist in the horticulture department of OSU's College of Agricultural Sciences. He directs the honeybee lab and master beekeeper program at OSU, and is among



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Honeybees buzz about an Oregon State University research hive. OSU Professor Ramesh Sagili was recently honored for his work by the Pacific branch of the Entomological Society of America.

a cadre of researchers who are attempting to solve the mystery of Colony Collapse Disorder, which has wiped

out many hives nationwide. Originally from India, Sagili earned a doctorate in entomology from Texas

A&M University in 2007 and was hired at OSU in 2009 after beekeepers and farmers pressed the Legislature to fund honeybee research.

While some blame colony collapse on causes ranging from pesticides to cell phones, Sagili has maintained that a variety of factors are more likely, including the presence of parasites.

He believes nutrition is key to bee health.

Pollination is critical to West Coast crops, and beekeepers truck thousands of hives to California beginning each January. They move hives north as crops blossom in rotation, beginning with almond orchards and on into berries, tree fruit and seed crops.

## Wheat industry seeks federal funding for falling number research

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

The Pacific Northwest wheat industry is asking Congress to fund research into the reliability and accuracy of the falling number test and the quality of soft white wheat.

The industry wants the U.S. House appropriations committee to provide \$1 million to the USDA Agricultural Research Service to study the accuracy of the test and \$2 million in National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Agriculture and Food Research Initiative grants to study quality loss in soft white wheat.

Farmers were caught off guard last year when roughly 44 percent of the soft white wheat crop and 42 percent of the club wheat crop received ratings below 300 in the falling number test at grain elevators. The test gauges starch quality in wheat. Rain or rapid changes in weather at certain times before harvest causes an enzyme to damage starch in wheat. The lower the falling number, the more the starch has been damaged.

The industry estimates the damage last year cost between



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Nine Mile Falls, Wash., farmer Jim Ryan watches as Aaron Porter of the Washington State Department of Agriculture grain inspection program demonstrates the falling number test Feb. 9 at the Spokane Ag Expo and Pacific Northwest Farm Forum. The wheat industry is seeking federal funding for falling number research.

\$30 million and \$140 million. The funding would be used in 2018, said Michelle Hennings, executive director of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers.

The region's wheat industry has come together on the issue, Hennings said. "We realize the impact this has had, and we're working our hardest to come up with solutions so this doesn't happen again," she said.

The effort includes Alex McGregor, CEO of the McGregor Co. in Colfax, Wash.

"It's going to be really important to work together so people aren't stuck in a vulnerable position," McGregor said. "Those are significant deductions."

He said the magnitude of the falling number problem coupled with already low grain prices have been "particularly painful for many farm families."

Farmington, Wash., wheat farmer Bruce Nelson estimates his falling number discounts ranged from 25 cents to \$1 per bushel on 25 percent

of his crop. His lowest sample tested at 224, well below the 300 industry standard.

But the reliability of the test has been called into question. He said that when he had his wheat samples re-tested, 80 percent came back with higher falling numbers.

"Some (were) much higher, as much as 50 to 80 points higher," he said.

Test results can also vary by location, Nelson said.

One option is breeding wheat for resistance to starch damage, which takes years, he said.

Nelson said the federal research funding is important to get more information.

"If we don't get that done, we're going to have the same situation happen to us again and again and again, and I don't think it'll get any better," he said.

Even with funding, it will take seven to eight years to find answers to Nelson's question.

"In the meantime, we're kind of at the whim of whatever goes on out there," he said. "The only thing we can do is (get) more information right now to help solve our own problems."

## Oregon water measurement bill passes initial committee

### House Bill 2705 referred to House Rules Committee

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

SALEM — Irrigators would be required to install devices to measure their water usage in Oregon under a bill that's won approval from an initial legislative committee.

The House Committee on Energy and the Environment voted 7-1 in favor of a "do pass" recommendation for House Bill 2705 during an April 11 work session.

However, the bill won't immediately be voted on by the full House. It has first been referred to the House Rules Committee, where bills aren't subject to the same legislative