

Oregon

Many Oregon farm bills make progress; others in limbo

Regular 2017 legislative session enters final stretch

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — As Oregon's 2017 regular legislative session enters its final month, several farm-related bills have either passed or are making significant progress, while others remain in limbo.

Many proposals that seek new funding or include a financial element are awaiting action in the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, which is

not subject to regular legislative deadlines.

The most controversial bills dealing with pesticides, antibiotics and genetic engineering have largely died, but others — such as a bill imposing liability on biotech patent holders — have been directed to committees where they can survive until the session's end.

However, numerous bills that either faced minimal resistance or were amended to overcome opposition have recently cleared key committees or been approved by the full Legislature, including:

- Wetland rebuilding exemption: Under House Bill

2785, agricultural buildings destroyed in fires and other natural disasters could be rebuilt without obtaining fill-removal permits, even if state regulators believe they're located in wetlands.

The proposal was sparked by the plight of Jesse Bounds, who tried rebuilding two burned-down hay barns only to find out he was subject to steep wetland mitigation penalties from the Department of State Lands.

The bill breezed through the House without a hitch, but it faced some headwinds in the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

A couple of Bounds' neighbors objected to the bill, mostly due to complaints about his hay-compressing operation.

Members of the committee also expressed some concerns about language in HB 2785, requiring the time-consuming drafting of an amendment clarifying the bill's purpose and parameters.

However, the bill is now headed for a vote on the Senate floor after obtaining the committee's unanimous approval.

- Historic farm houses: Concerns about limited housing availability in Oregon prompted lawmakers to propose several bills allowing

"accessory dwelling units," or ADUs, on farmland or otherwise easing land use restrictions.

Most of the bills have died, but one proposal has gained solid traction: House Bill 3012 allows historic homes to be used as ADUs instead of being demolished when a new house is built in a rural residential zone.

The bill unanimously passed the House and now awaits a vote on the Senate floor after clearing the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

- Hard cider land use: Producers of hard cider would be subject to the same land

use rules as winemakers under Senate Bill 677, which is awaiting Gov. Kate Brown's signature after winning unanimous approval in the Senate and more recently, the House.

The Oregon Farm Bureau expressed some reservations about SB 677 without outright opposing the bill, which allows cideries to serve food and offer bed-and-breakfast lodging, among other provisions.

- On-farm sewage treatment: Waste from septic tanks will now be allowed to be treated on-site in farm zones, where it's applied to fields as fertilizer, under House Bill 2179.

Researchers: Native sage, grasses handle wildfires better

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Rangeland scientist Lisa Ellsworth of Oregon State University has a thing for fire, especially how various ecosystems respond to the wildfires that bedevil much of the rural West.

Ellsworth and research co-author J. Boone Kauffman, a senior research professor at OSU, tracked the recovery of three areas from "prescribed" fires in the Lava Beds National Monument in Northern California. They documented a truism: Plants native to the sagebrush steppe, such as sage and various bunchgrasses, recover from fire better than invasive or intrusive species such as cheatgrass and Western juniper.

Ellsworth said the study results hold some lessons for ranchers and for Greater sage grouse conservation work. Chief among them is that fire, often started by lightning, has long been part of the cycle in the arid rangelands of the West. "It's important we remember these are ecosystems that evolved with fire," she said.

While some people are fearful of fire, many produc-



Courtesy Lisa Ellsworth/Oregon State University

A test plot in the Lava Beds National Monument in Northern California immediately after a "prescribed" fire. A rangeland scientist at Oregon State University said an intact sagebrush steppe habitat with native plants recovers well from wildfires compared to range taken over by invasive or intrusive plants such as cheatgrass and Western juniper. Researchers burned three test sites and tracked the recovery.

ers recognize that if sagebrush steppe is in good condition, "Maybe some fire isn't all negative," Ellsworth said.

Overgrazing in some areas opened the door to non-native grasses and shrubs that burn hotter and more frequently.

"They really change the story," Ellsworth said. Cheatgrass in particular favors more frequent fire.

The research involved three areas. One was dominated by native perennial grasses and sagebrush, and there'd historically been very little grazing there. A second site had been

overgrazed and was filled with cheatgrass. The third was covered with Western juniper, a notorious water "thief" that crowds out sage and native grasses.

After prescribed burns in the spring and fall, the site with native plants fared better. About 65 percent of the sagebrush survived the fall fires and 33 percent survived the spring fires — important to land managers who are timing prescribed burns. Spring burning does more harm because the plants are actively growing, while fall fires burn dead material, Ellsworth said.



Courtesy photo

A cinnabar moth larva eats a tansy ragwort plant in a form of weed biocontrol.

Oregon weed biocontrol spared in budget proposal

Farm industry feared increased usage of pesticides

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon farm regulators would not lose a biological control program for weeds, as feared earlier this year, under the latest budget proposal before lawmakers.

The weed biocontrol position at the Oregon Depart-

ment of Agriculture was set to be cut under Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's proposed biennial budget for the agency.

Under the 2017-2019 ODA budget approved by a key group of legislators on May 31, though, the weed biocontrol program would receive more than \$250,000 for the biennium.

Weed biocontrol typically involves deploying insects or pathogens that prey on specific undesirable plants, such as cinnabar moth larvae consuming tansy ragwort.

The weed biocontrol position is now vacant but ODA could begin recruiting a new expert if the budget is adopted by the full Legislature and a state government hiring freeze is lifted, said Lauren Henderson, the agency's assistant director.

Rural weed control departments worried that ending the biological control program would ultimately lead to more money being spent on increased herbicide spraying.

"Without this position being filled, weed departments are relying on the best guess to gather, place, and redistribute the biocontrols," said Theodore Orr, Umatilla County's weed supervisor, in written testimony.

Aside from preserving weed biocontrol, ODA's budget proposal also contains good news for dairy farmers and other "confined animal feeding operations," or CAFOs, which are inspected by state regulators.

Under Brown's proposal, \$250,000 dedicated to CAFO inspections would be eliminated from the general fund portion of ODA's budget, with the burden instead shifting to "other funds."

"If that shift had happened, we would definitely have to raise the fees," said Henderson.

The Subcommittee on Natural Resources of the Joint Ways and Means Committee has approved a budget that leaves the \$250,000 for CAFO inspections in the general fund category, so fees won't be hiked to cover that gap.

Even so, the subcommittee's budget does decrease the general fund portion of ODA's budget to \$23.3 million, down from \$24.6 million during the previous biennium.

Much of that reduction is accomplished by shifting certain expenses from the general fund to "other funds" and federal funds, with the overall budget growing to \$118 million, up from \$112 million during 2015-2017.

For example, nearly \$1.4 million for food safety programs would be shifted from the general fund to the "other" category, but ODA believes it has enough cash on hand for the next two years to prevent a fee increase, Henderson said.

Part of ODA's administrative costs — \$300,000 — is also shifted to "other funds," but this change alone won't force a fee increase, he said.

"It does put a burden on the other funded programs," Henderson said.

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