

Group calls for \$312 million to upgrade roads, bridges

By PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A subgroup of the legislative committee crafting a statewide transportation package has recommended an increase of \$255.6 million to \$312.4 million in annual spending to upgrade roads and bridges.

That would require raising revenues equivalent to a 9- to 11-cent increase in the state’s 30-cent gas tax. The money would likely come from a combination of sources, which could include a hike in the gas tax, registration fees, tolling or other options.

“Even the equivalent of 11 cents is yet to be determined,” said Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose. “This is all highly fluid.”

The state now spends about \$1.3 billion a year on transportation maintenance and upgrades. The Oregon Transportation Commission has recommended spending an additional \$574 million a year to upgrade roads and bridges to ease congestion, particularly in the Portland metro area.

But the legislative subgroup could not reach a consensus on an amount, said Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, who led the group.

“We didn’t reach consensus on much of anything, but I think we all agreed we need to do something,” Bentz said.

The recommendation comes from the first of five subgroups from the legislative Committee on Transportation Preservation and Modernization, each working on different aspects of the package. The other groups are coming



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A subgroup of the legislative committee hammering out a transportation package has called for up to \$312 million in new spending to upgrade roads and bridges. That would require a revenue hike equal to an 11-cent increase in the gas tax, though the money could come from a variety of sources.

up with suggestions for easing congestion, improving pedestrian and cycling commutes, coming up with accountability measures and addressing air and rail needs.

The four other groups will report their recommendations tentatively by April 3.

“We have never done a process like this where we have negotiated a giant package functionally in public, and pieces are going to come and go,” Johnson said. “We’ve got a long, long way to go.”

After hearing the five reports, the full committee of 14 members will have to reconcile the recommendations into a transportation package, expected to send hundreds of millions of dollars for projects to the Oregon Department of Transportation.

“That just exacerbates the conundrum that all of us are faced with of putting together a package,” Johnson said.

About 33 percent of the road pavement in Oregon is in fair or worse condition and will need replacement soon, according to ODOT.

More than 700 bridges in the state need to be seismically retrofitted — at a cost of \$5 billion in the next 20 years — to avoid collapse in the event of a major earthquake, the agency estimates. Currently, the agency upgrades only three bridges were year, said Paul Mather, ODOT’s Highway Division administrator.

The biggest driver for upgrading the bridges is “the long-term economic effects we are going to have on our

economy,” Mather said.

“We have seen disasters like Katrina and others, and this is going to be on a bigger scale than that,” Mather said of a major earthquake. “You’re going to have industry ... to leave state ... if we don’t have ways for their workers to get to work, their goods and services to get out to the marketplace.”

The subcommittee focused on economic lifelines in the Portland metro area and looked for ways to continue mobility throughout the state through north, south and east connections.

“There are tough choices to make, and we zeroed in on where the biggest impact we were going to have on the economy with the investment,” Mather said.

Bill would authorize GMO trespass lawsuits against patent holders

Genetic technology companies would be liable for GMO damages

By Mateusz Perkowski
Capital Bureau

SALEM — New lawsuits over trespass by genetically engineered crops would be authorized in Oregon under proposed legislation that would hold biotech patent holders liable for damages.

Supporters of House Bill 2739 say it’s a common sense strategy to remedy problems caused by genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, similar to consumer lawsuits over defective products.

“This is not a wild legal grab. We will not be compensated for our angst. We will only be compensated for provable legal damages,” said Sandra Bishop of the Our Family Farms Coalition, which supports HB 2739.

Jerry Erstrom, a Malheur County farmer, said he supports the bill even though he’s planted genetically engineered corn on his property.

“If you do something that messes up my livelihood, you should be held accountable for it,” Erstrom said at a March 16 hearing of the House Judiciary Committee.

Creeping bentgrass that’s genetically engineered to tolerate glyphosate herbicides escaped control in Eastern Oregon, and the crop’s patent holder should be responsible for control costs as it spreads, he said.

“It’s coming to the Willamette Valley. Say what you want, it’s going to be here,” Erstrom said.

Proponents of HB 2739 say there’s nothing new about holding companies liable for their products hurting people or property, but organic and conventional farmers must currently bear the financial burden from GMO crop contamination alone.

“We’re not coming to you from a level playing field. Harm is only coming one way,” said Amy van Saun, legal fellow with the Center for Food Safety, which supports the bill.

Supporters say the legal mechanism of HB 2739 is simple and fair because the liability rests with companies that profit from GMO patents.

Complicated searches for a culprit won’t be necessary, since biotech traits can be determined with genetic tests, said Elise Higley, director of the Our



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Malheur County farmer Jerry Erstrom points out a genetically engineered creeping bentgrass plant June 2016, on an irrigation ditch bank near Ontario. Erstrom testified March 16 in favor of proposed legislation in Oregon that would allow farmers whose crops are damaged by GMOs to sue patent holders for damages.

Family Farms Coalition.

“It’s super easy to track it back to who is responsible,” Higley said.

Opponents of the bill argue that pollination among related crops isn’t limited to GMOs, but neighboring farmers have long found practical ways to avoid unwanted crosses.

“It’s one of the greatest risks I face, but it’s a manageable risk,” said Kevin Richards, who grows seeds and other crops near Madras.

Under a provision in HB 2739, plaintiffs are entitled to triple the amount of economic damages caused by the unwanted presence of GMOs, which is clearly meant to be punitive, according to the bill’s detractors.

“It would single out and stigmatize biotech patents,” said Barry Bushue, president of the Oregon Farm Bureau.

Critics also questioned the logic of making patent holders liable for unauthorized GMOs, since the problem may be caused by irresponsible practices of neighboring landowners or factors beyond human control, like birds.

“They sell the seed but they have no control once that happens,” said Roger Beyer, a lobbyist for the Oregon Seed

Council and other crop groups.

Apart from the immediate impacts of the bill, imposing new liability on patent holders may discourage seed companies from offering innovative products in Oregon, said Scott Dahlman, policy director of the Oregonians for Food and Shelter agribusiness group.

If companies face the threat of additional lawsuits, “they will reconsider whether they sell things here,” Dahlman said.

Pete Postlewait, a farmer near Canby, Ore., said he’s disturbed by the precedent of punishing patent holders for the actions of end users, since that logic could be extended to non-GMO cross-pollination.

“By weakening plant patent laws in this way, it will surely stifle innovation in plant breeding,” he said.

The bill’s language also encompasses new methods, such as gene editing, that are used by university breeders who often hold their own patents, said Steve Strauss, a professor who studies biotechnology at Oregon State University.

“Wheat breeders and others would love to use this gene editing technology,” he said.

LEGAL NOTICE

LEGAL NOTICE

The Wallowa County Health Care District Board of Directors will hold its regular board meeting on Monday, March 27, 2017 at 11:30am in the Conference Room at Wallowa Memorial Hospital.

A copy of the Board agenda will be available from the office of the Wallowa County Chieftain, KWVR or the Administrative Office at Wallowa Memorial Hospital.

This meeting is open to the public.

Wallowa Memorial Hospital is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

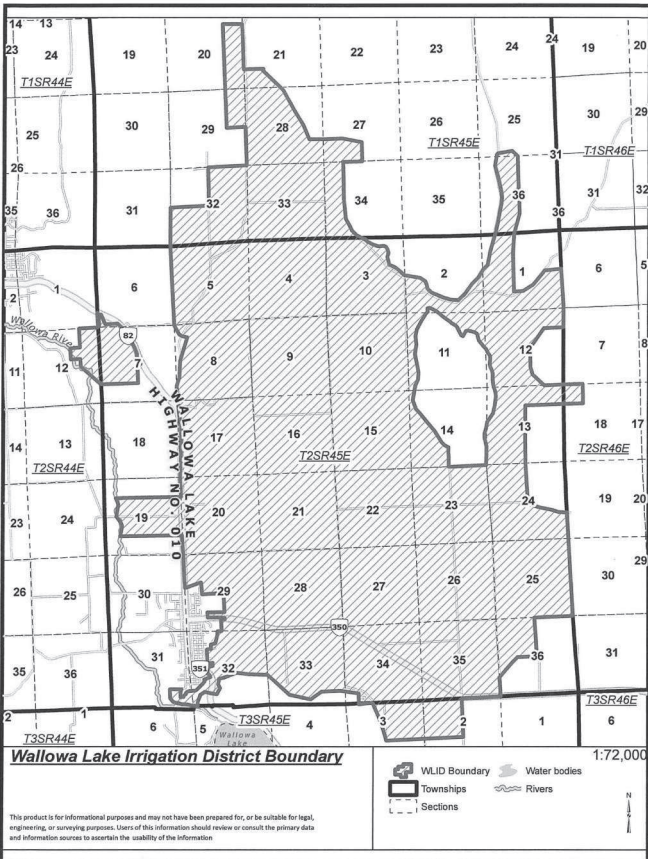
LEGAL NOTICE

PUBLIC NOTICE

ORS 545.025(6)

Notice is hereby given that a hearing on the formation of an irrigation district under the provisions of ORS Chapter 545 will be held before the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners in the Thornton Conference Room of the Wallowa County Courthouse, 101 S River Street, Enterprise, OR 97828, on April 17, 2017 at 10:00am. The name of the proposed irrigation district is “Wallowa Lake Irrigation District.” The boundaries of the proposed district are set out on the map that accompanies this notice. The purpose for which the irrigation district is being formed is to provide for the betterment of irrigation works that serve the lands within the boundaries of the proposed district. All interested parties may appear and be heard at the hearing.

Meeting and hearings are open to the public. Those interested in attending are encouraged to do so. Questions, please contact the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners office at 426-4543, ext. 130.



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