OREGON IN BRIEF

From wire reports

Driver's ed teacher who sexually abused students gets jail

PORTLAND — A Portland Community College driving instructor, accused by nearly two dozen girls or women of sexually abusing them during lessons, was sentenced Feb. 20 to six months in jail, the Washington County District Attorney's Office said.

Paul Douglas Burdick, 48, pleaded guilty to six counts of misdemeanor third-degree sex abuse in January, court records show. He had faced another 15 counts of sex abuse, which prosecutors later dismissed, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

Burdick was accused of groping driving students during practice or test drives and would instruct some of the young women to perform jumping jacks to record them on his cellphone, authorities said.

The Washington County Sheriff's Office said the abuse occurred between 2012 and 2018 while Burdick taught driving courses at the school's Willow Creek Center in Hillsboro. Portland Community College fired him in April 2019 amid the criminal investigation.

Burdick also served as a bishop at the Hillsboro Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which has removed him from the post.

Three of the students have filed a lawsuit against Burdick, seeking $2 million each.

$5.9M lawsuit filed over alleged illegal parking in Portland

PORTLAND — Portland intentionally allows drivers to park vehicles illegally close to crosswalks and intersections, making it difficult to navigate the city and potentially deadly for all road users, a lawsuit filed this week in Multnomah County Circuit Court says.

The lawsuit seeks to address what attorney Scott Kocher describes as Portland's "ongoing failure" to provide adequate sight distance at street corners or crosswalks, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. Kocher is using the 2019 death of a motorcyclist, one of 49 people killed in what was the deadliest year since 1997, as a test case to argue the city's negligence.

The family of Elijah Coe, a 48-year-old chef who was killed on East Burnside Street in May, is seeking $5.9 million in damages and demands the city retrofit its intersections to comply with its own code governing sight distances as well as state law.

Dylan Rivera, a city transportation spokesman, declined comment citing the ongoing legal dispute.

Coe was riding his motorcycle when a vehicle driven by Eric Whitfield turned left onto the same street. According to the lawsuit, parked vehicles blocked Whitfield's view of the street.

The lawsuit also cites Whitfield for negligence and failing to yield the right of way. He couldn't immediately be reached for comment.

Coe swerved to avoid Whitfield's vehicle and struck a westbound driver head-on, the lawsuit said. He died five days later.

Explaining cap and trade

By Claire Withycombe and Jake Thomas
Oregon Capital Bureau

EO Media Group file photo

Timber Unity supporters and members congregated outside the Oregon state Capitol to protest a cap-and-trade bill they say threatens the rural economy.

SALEM — The arguments and critiques are flying across the state about Senate Bill 1530, Oregon's plan to set limits on — and shrink — the state's greenhouse gas emissions.

Proponents of the cap-and-trade program say it's needed in the face of federal inaction on climate change, which is already affecting the state.

Opponents say it would do little to solve climate change while increasing costs for consumers across the state and particularly damaging Oregon's rural economy.

The legislation, which stretches dozens of pages and has been amended repeatedly, has many moving parts. The bill is expected to make fuel, natural gas and other carbon-intensive energy sources more expensive. Proponents say that will spur efficiencies and innovations that could cause energy prices to drop.

The Oregon Capital Bureau consulted energy and climate policy experts and reviewed state and federal reports and analyses to cut through political claims and focus on what the program would do as proposed and how Oregonians would be affected.

What are greenhouse gases, and why does the state want to cut back on them?

Greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere and change the Earth's climate, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The largest is carbon dioxide, released into the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels, solid waste and biological materials.

According to a 2018 report from the Oregon Global Warming Commission, the effects of increased greenhouse gas emissions are already here. The report states forest fires start earlier, last longer, are more intense and produce smoke that's particularly harmful to sensitive groups. The report also states Oregon is seeing less snowpack, which can result in droughts.

In the long term, Oregon could see a dramatic die-off of forests or sea-level rises in coastal communities, according to the report. Oregon emitted about 65 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2017. The state wants to cut that dramatically by 2050.

What environmental impact will this bill have?

Climate change is a global phenomenon. Critics of the current effort say Oregon's emissions account for just a sliver of total released worldwide.

After President Donald Trump pulled out of the Paris climate agreement in 2017, Gov. Kate Brown announced Oregon would join other states, cities and countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Cap-and-trade programs can improve local air quality by reducing pollution, while lowering global greenhouse gas emissions.

I've heard this will make gas at the pump more expensive. Is that true?

The program will require companies importing fuel into Oregon to pay for emissions those fuels will generate.

Gas prices could increase by about 20 cents per gallon in 2022 in areas where the program will start, according to an analysis provided by Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, a leading author of the bill. After 2022, gas prices could increase by 1 to 2 cents per gallon annually.

According to that analysis, large parts of the state are years from experiencing an increase because the legislation would phase in the requirement on fuel importers by geography as follows:

2022: Portland metro area

2025: Benton, Clackamas, Clatsop, Columbia, Douglas, Hood River, Jackson, Josephine, Lane, Lincoln, Linn, Marion, Multnomah, Polk, Tillamook, Washington and Yamhill

2028: Coos and Curry counties, and the metropolitan areas of Bend and Klamath Falls

Counties not included: Baker, Crook, Deschutes, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Jefferson, Klamath, Lake, Malheur, Morrow, Sherman, Umatilla, Union, Wallowa, Wasco, Wheeler

Counties can volunteer to join the program, which would give them access to new state money to use for local environmental projects aimed at reducing greenhouse gases.

Once 23 counties are covered by the regulations, the entire state would require fuel importers to buy allowances, essentially a permit to pollute from the state, that corresponds to emissions.

To insulate some Oregonians from those higher fuel costs, Senate Bill 1578 would provide a tax credit for people making less than $65,000 per year who live in areas of the state where fuel importers have to buy allowances. Those credits would be higher in counties subject to the regulation that are also more rural, where the average resident travels longer distances by car.

Greg Dotson, assistant professor of law at the University of Oregon who is an expert in environmental and energy law, said before a similar system went into effect in California, critics predicted gas prices in that state would spike.

But he pointed to U.S. Energy Information Administration numbers showing between 2014 and 2016 gas prices on the West Coast dropped by a dollar while California was enacting its carbon pricing program. Numbers show gas prices in California since then have ebbed and flowed.

The global oil market largely dictates gas prices, Dotson said.

"These state programs, they're just the gnat on the dog, which is the global oil market," said Dotson. "And these big global oil market forces are determining oil prices."

How will this affect my personal natural gas bill?

According to estimates from Dembrow, low-income residential customers would be exempted from any natural gas increases. The state Public Utility Commission would determine who qualifies as low income.

Other residential customers would see, on average, a 7% increase in 2022, according to the analysis provided by Dembrow. For the typical, non-low income customer, Northwest Natural estimates that's about $50 in the first year.

The legislation would provide money to weatherize homes and for other energy projects that could bring down customers' bills.

How will this affect my electricity bill?

The Citizens' Utility Board, which advocates for residential and small business customers, said in its analysis the new program "should not have any harmful effects on electricity consumers."

Oregon lawmakers in 2016 required a phase out of coal-fired electricity by 2030, while pushing large utilities to use more renewable energy sources. Since the utilities already are adjusting for that requirement, there shouldn't be additional costs to electricity customers as a result of the greenhouse gas program, the Citizens' Utility Board concluded.

"Electric service consumers will likely benefit from enhanced energy efficiency and other clean energy programs because a price on (greenhouse gas) emissions will improve these programs' cost effectiveness," the board said in a briefing paper.

Dotson said a regional greenhouse program covering 10 states in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic has reduced carbon emissions while power bills have decreased. A consultant's report in 2018 found consumers covered by the initiative saw their energy bills decrease because of efforts to improve energy efficiency.

Will cap and trade make everything else more expensive?

Business groups have complained the legislation will increase the cost of doing business in a way ultimately passed on to consumers. Others are more skeptical.

"An argument that I've been hearing for 20 years about any policy to address climate change, is that it's just going to raise prices on people and be unfair," said Dotson, who previously worked as vice president for energy and environmental policy at the Center for American Progress. "We're in a fundamentally different world now just because renewable energy is, in most cases, actually cheaper than fossil for many applications. So there's this huge opportunity to invest in those things, and actually reap rewards for people."

Dallas Burtraw, a senior fellow at Resources for the Future who also advises California on its cap and trade program, said economists tend to favor cap-and-trade because it allows companies to decide for themselves how to comply with the new regulations.

"If I say that you have to do something, and you have to do it in a certain way, and that's legally enforceable, it'll get you to do what I said," Burtraw said. "You might know of a lot cheaper ways to do that, or ways that would give you a lot more flexibility and cause less disruption to your production practices."

He said flexibility is a key feature of cap-and-trade programs.

"You get to decide how you're going to reduce those emissions or whether you're going to reduce those emissions, or whether you're going to pay somebody else to do it," he said.

Burtraw also noted government money raised through the program in turn funds energy efficiency projects, which can make businesses more competitive.

"It's important not to just take half the story," Burtraw said. "So half the story is that you're raising the costs of combusting fossil fuels and that, everything else being equal, would seemingly disadvantage an industry compared to competitors in other states. But the response to that, that the state could help amplify through the use of revenues that are collected, is to promote innovation and investments to become more efficient. And there's loads of evidence that this has worked out really well."

Low-income families will see little to no cost impacts as a result of the program due to exemptions and credits, according to the analysis from Dembrow's office.

Moderate income families can expect to see increases of less than $100 per year, and high income households in the Portland metro area can expect to see increases of $150 to $400 starting in 2022, depending on how many cars they have and how fuel efficient those cars are. The effect on high-income earners elsewhere will depend on where they live.

For the complete version of this explainer, including how cap and trade would work, go to www.lagrandeobserver.com/greenhouse.