

Agricultural exporters want DOT to address shipping challenges

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

WASHINGTON — Nearly 300 groups representing agricultural exporters, farmers and ranchers are appealing to the U.S. Department of Transportation to intervene in “predatory and unreasonable” practices by ocean carriers.

In a letter to U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, the groups said carriers are declining to ship U.S. agricultural commodity exports from U.S. ports and imposing hundreds of millions of dollars in punitive charges already determined to be unreasonable by the Federal Maritime Commission.

“The burden on hard-working exporters, manufacturers, farmers, ranchers and our rural communities is overwhelming. We urge the Department of Transportation to utilize all existing authorities to remedy the challenges experienced by U.S. agricultural exporters,” they said.

The groups said the ocean shipping industry, which once had dozens of carriers, has consolidated over the last three decades. A result of that consolidation is complete reliance on less than a dozen foreign carriers to deliver U.S. agricultural products overseas.

“The tenuous nature of this arrangement is evident as VOCCs (vessel-operating common carriers) are

delivering massive volumes of imported shipments to U.S. ports and then electing to leave without refilling empty containers with American goods and products.

The lucrative freight rates paid by the import cargo, combined with congestion and delay at ports on the West and East Coasts are leading VOCCs to immediately return empty containers to their overseas ports of origin, they said.

“The situation is exacerbated by carriers’ failure to provide accurate notice to our exporters of arrival/departure and cargo loading times, and then imposing draconian financial penalties on the exporters for ‘missing’ those loading windows — a practice that the FMC has found to be unreasonable,” they said.

Foreign markets are critical to American farmers and ranchers with more than 20% of agricultural production going abroad. It is cost prohibitive for producers to rework the supply chain and find alternative means of fulfilling their overseas contracts, they said.

“This impossibility coupled with significant pricing increases explains estimates of nearly \$1.5 billion in lost agriculture exports. These losses come on the heels of trade conflict and pandemic that have wiped away markets globally,” they said.

The mounting frustration of U.S. agriculture is



Associated Press, File

This undated photo shows Terminal 18 at the Port of Seattle. A group of nearly 300 groups representing ag exporters, farmers and ranchers are asking the U.S. Department of Transportation to intervene in the practices of ocean carriers.

why a vast array of food and agriculture associations supported the Federal Maritime Commission’s investigation to address VOCCs predatory or unreasonable behavior and its rule setting forth guidelines for detention and demurrage, they said.

“We need action now; not additional studies. We ask the Department of Transportation to assist the Commission in expediting its enforcement options,” they said.

The groups also urged the department to consider its existing authorities to determine how it can assist in overcoming the current challenges in shipping goods and products.

The groups sent copies of the letter to USDA and chairpersons of Senate and House committees involved in transportation and commerce.

BAKERY

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branding parties. Schreiber explained that the cost of the cookie partially depends on the size, number of colors used, whether there is an air brush technique used or she uses a projector. She cited the FFA cookies she made for the state FFA officers as an example. The FFA emblem is intricate and there are several colors involved in each cookie.

They have made Valentine heart-shaped cookies, shamrocks and beer mugs decorated with green, foamy, white icing for St. Patrick’s Day, tulips and eggs for spring and the list seems to go on.

Their most popular cookie thus far? Ear tag-shaped cookies that have been ordered for several branding events.

There have even been Weeds of the West cookies for someone who is a pesticide applicator.

A popular cookie has been “the Dipper,” a small cookie that is dipped in buttercream icing. Rancho Road Bakery also makes what they call their “Rustic Ranch” cookie that Warnock describes as, “a huge, almost half-pound chocolate chip, dark chocolate and peanut butter, cookie.”

For spring and summer, they will be trying strawberry and lemonade cookie varieties.

Although there is not that much sugar in the cookies, Warnock said they easily go through 50 pounds of flour in a month and a lot of powdered sugar.

Quality control has been in-house with Warnock’s husband, Charlie, and her son, Devin and Schreiber’s boyfriend, Matt, all making sure nothing goes out that isn’t top of the line.

They like to have a week’s notice for orders especially if the cookies involve different techniques or multiple colors; costs vary. If they can, they will try to accommodate people’s requests for



Debi Warnock/Contributed Photo

Deidre Schreiber, a full-time student at Eastern Oregon University, La Grande, holds a plate of cookies baked at the Wallowa County business — Rancho Road Bakery — she and her mother, Debi Warnock, started last year.

cookies, with shorter lead times.

“If we can, we’ll fit them in,” said Schreiber.

Orders can be made by texting, through Instagram, calling or messaging, and can be delivered within the area or picked up at agreed-upon locations.

Although there are no plans in the works for a brick-and-mortar location, Rancho Road Bakery has plans for a Cookie-of-the-Month project with themed cookies and to set up at the Wallowa County Farmers Market.

They have also experimented with themed kits, which include the baked cookies along with the frosting and decorations for people to do their own decorating.

Schreiber summed up their baking endeavor in one short sentence. She said Rancho Road Bakery is “local cookies for local people.”

GRAZING

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Owyhee Cattlemen’s Association, which have argued the BLM’s actions threaten to undermine the important connection between private property and surrounding grazing allotments.

Schroeder said the BLM has in the past revoked grazing preferences separately from grazing permits, which simply allow cattle to be released onto government property.

In the case of Nevada rancher Wayne Hage, an icon of the “Sagebrush Rebellion” against government grazing restrictions, 12 years elapsed between the two actions.

The government’s own definition of grazing preference provides a property with super-priority to apply for grazing access regardless of why a permit was lost, Schroeder said.

“It doesn’t say it must be an existing permit. It doesn’t say it must be an expiring permit,” he said. Christine England,



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press, File

From left to right, Mike Hanley and his wife, Linda, stand with daughter Martha Corrigan and her husband, John, at the family’s ranch near Jordan Valley. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals heard oral arguments Monday, May 3, 2021, in the family’s lawsuit against the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

attorney for the government, argued that Hanley’s permit was canceled for non-compliance with grazing regulations and thus “could not hold this authority of renewal.”

When the permit is canceled, “the grazing preference is automatically and simultaneously extinguished,” England said.

The BLM must invoke a separate process to cancel a grazing preference only when a grazing permit isn’t renewed after a 10-year term, she said.

If that term is interrupted because the permit is canceled for non-compliance, as in Hanley’s case, the grazing preference is lost as well, she said.

ROBOTS

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with the idea around 2018 when talking with friends who farm. Mikesell had previously worked on technology for Uber. After hearing farmers’ frustrations about labor, Mikesell set out to create robotic weeders.

Carbon Robotics is still small-scale. The company produced about half a dozen units in 2021. They quickly sold out, and in 2022, the company plans to produce 30 units.

Several farmers in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and New

Mexico have already pre-ordered them. One New Mexico grower, James Johnson of Carzalia Valley Produce, pre-ordered four robots after participating in trials last year.

Mikesell, the CEO, declined to name the price of a robot, but said it’s “approximately the cost of a medium-sized tractor.”

Mikesell said most of his customers have 4,000 to 15,000 acres, but the robots can be used in smaller farms. The units have been tested with carrots, asparagus, onions, broccoli, leafy greens and other commodities.

Some farmers say they hope the technology will

allow them to convert some conventional acreage to organic production.

Several groups that represent farm laborers have expressed concern about the rise of automation, saying robots could eventually displace agricultural workers from their jobs.

But many industry associations say they expect agricultural automation to continue expanding.

Johnson, the New Mexico farmer, said he “absolutely” sees automation as farming’s future.

Myers, of Owyhee Produce, agrees.

“We’re watching the future,” Myers said, “right now.”

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