

Ranchers worry Idaho grazing lease rate could increase

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Many Idaho ranchers worry the Idaho Department of Lands is preparing to significantly increase its grazing lease rate.

IDL officials say they are studying grazing lease rates as part of an evaluation of the grazing program business plan, which determines how the state's 1.4 million acres of rangeland are managed.

A draft grazing program business plan released in November does identify a theoretical target rate for state leases equal to 70 percent of the average private lease rate. But of-

officials say the IDL will engage industry stakeholders before making any specific recommendations.

"We will make no proposals until we have fully gone through this process with the industry," said Mike Murphy, IDL's bureau chief for endowment leasing. "We have no intention of using the business plan as a mechanism for proposing rates."

There are 1,169 grazing leases on IDL land, representing 256,681 animal unit months. An AUM is the amount of forage needed to feed a cow and calf for a month.

Many ranchers, and the

Idaho Cattle Association, are concerned the IDL intends to significantly raise its grazing lease rate.

In a newsletter sent to members, the ICA said that after completing a detailed review of the plan, the group "was greatly dismayed to discover the intentions of IDL in dramatically increasing its grazing lease rate and in altering the grazing fee structure."

IDL extended the comment period on its draft grazing business plan to Jan. 30 and ICA told its members that "it is imperative the IDL hears from the grazing community in volume."

Online

Comments on the Idaho Department of Lands' draft grazing program business plan can be submitted by email to: comments@idl.idaho.gov. The plan can be viewed on the IDL's web page.

Sen. Bert Brackett, a Republican rancher from Roger-son who leases rangeland from the IDL, said, "It's pretty well recognized that the fee probably will go up. The question is by how much."

Several ranchers told the Capital Press they are concerned that IDL is placing too much emphasis in comparing private and state lease rates.

The average private leasing rate in Idaho was \$15.50 per

AUM in 2014, while the state rate was \$6.89, according to IDL.

If the theoretical 70 percent target rate mentioned in the draft plan is used, that would bring the state rate to \$10.85.

The draft plan recommends a two-tier management structure and those leases that fall in the upper tier would pay more.

When a rancher leases state ground, "They're leasing grass on open space," said Jim Ha-

genbarth, who leases 10,000 acres from the IDL and estimates he has spent millions of dollars installing infrastructure on state land over the years.

"The infrastructure we have to utilize to do a good job of grazing cows costs a lot of money," he said. "The (IDL) doesn't provide anything other than a bill."

In comments submitted on the draft plan, the ICA said the plan apparently overlooks the largest grazing lessor in the state, the federal government. The federal grazing rate, which was \$1.35 in 2014, "should serve as an anchor to any proposed changes," the ICA stated.

Farm Bureau members prepare for convention

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Will comedian Jay Leno stick to corny farm jokes when he performs at the American Farm Bureau Federation's national convention on Monday, or will he plow new ground?

Either way, Leno's routine will be a break from the heavy topics that otherwise fill the agenda for the 96th annual convention in San Diego.



Greenman

Workshops and presentations scheduled during the Jan. 9-14 convention include farm data security, water shortages, food safety regulations, the continuing FAA snag over using drones in agriculture and what to do when you and your labor force are targeted by federal immigration or Homeland Security investigations.

At the heart of the convention, however, is approval of the Farm Bureau's policy book for the coming year. First-time observers of the process are often struck by the purity of grass roots democracy in action: Ideas, often initiated at the county level, are brought forward for consideration by national delegates. They're debated in a courteous manner and voted up or down with a straight-forward efficiency that's a stark contrast to how many governmental bodies operate.

Gail McSpadden Greenman, the Oregon Farm Bureau's national affairs director, unabashedly describes the process as "sacred."

The policy book serves as the American Farm Bureau Federation's guide for the next 12 months.

"This is what tells me what I can support or not support," Greenman said. "This is like my lobbyist bible."

The process is "very specific" to Farm Bureau, she said.

"I don't know another organization as formal, structured and grass-roots as Farm Bureau," she said.

The convention typically includes receptions and social events such as a golf outing or cruise, and keynote talks by celebrities such as Leno, former long-time host of the "The Tonight Show." The daily workshops, on the other hand, pro-

vide cutting-edge information on some of agriculture's most pressing issues.

This year, a presentation on "big data" is likely to draw a big crowd. Increasingly, producers are beginning to think twice about the input, harvest and yield data streaming wirelessly off their equipment. Who owns it? Who has access to it? Does the data belong to the farmer, the ag-tech service company that processes it, or to the manufacturer whose equipment captures the information?

One of the convention speakers, Farmobile LLC, founder and CEO Jason Tatge, of Kansas, maintains that farmers should treat their data like a cash crop and sell it accordingly.

"It's becoming more and more of a big issue," said Peggy Kirk Hall, an assistant professor and director of the Agricultural and Resource Law Program at Ohio State University. "The concern is the potential misuse of that data and how can we avoid that."

In September 2014, AFBF released four instructional videos (<http://bit.ly/1s1IG88>) that discuss the trouble that may accompany the technology.

In the videos, Mary Kay Thatcher, senior director of congressional relations for AFBF, said contracts between producers and ag-tech providers must clarify who owns the data and whether it can be shared or sold. If an ag-tech firm receives federal funding, the farmer's data might not be exempt from Freedom of Information Act requests, Thatcher said.

In November, AFBF announced it reached agreement on data privacy and security principles that will "encourage the use and development of a full range of innovative, technology-driven tools and services to boost the productivity, efficiency and profitability of American agriculture."

Companies and commodity groups supporting the principles include AFBF, American Soybean Association, Beck's Hybrids, Dow AgroSciences LLC, DuPont Pioneer, John Deere, National Association of Wheat Growers, National Corn Growers Association, National Farmers Union, Raven Industries, USA Rice Federation and the Climate Corporation — a division of Monsanto.



Courtesy of Ceres Inc.

Experimental hybrids of sorghum are evaluated by a researcher from the Ceres biotech company. The USDA has determined a biotech cultivar of sorghum intended for ethanol production cannot be regulated as a plant pest but may still be restricted as a noxious weed.

Biotech energy crop may be regulated as weed

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Genetically modified sorghum used for ethanol production doesn't fall under USDA's biotechnology regulations, but the agency may still restrict the crop as a noxious weed.

Ceres Inc., a biotech company, inserted genetic information from several sources into the sorghum variety using a "gene gun," avoiding the use of a soil pathogen to transfer genes.

The USDA has agreed that the genetically engineered sorghum isn't a potential plant pest and thus cannot be restricted on that basis, but the agency is nonetheless considering regulating the crop as a noxious weed and "will discuss that subject in a separate communication," according to a letter recent-

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ly disclosed to the public.

Plant pests are viruses, bacteria or fungi that can cause disease within the plant, while noxious weeds are defined more generally as plants that damage crops or livestock.

Ceres' biotech cultivar "produces greater biomass and contains more fermentable sugars than non-genetically modified sorghum checks, thereby offering a higher yield potential," the company said in a letter requesting regulatory clarity from USDA.

It was transformed with synthetic genetic material and genes from mouse ear cross, which is considered a mustard weed, as well as other sorghum plants, the company said.

Capital Press was unable to reach Ceres for comment.

Ceres already has sorghum varieties available for sale, but the company is struggling financially, according to documents submitted to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

In its 2014 fiscal year,

the company's product sales dropped to \$146,000, down nearly 70 percent from the previous year, which the company attributes to "changes and reductions in our sales incentive and promotional programs," Ceres said in a regulatory filing.

Revenue from collaborative research and government grants fell by more than half, to \$2.26 million, as Ceres completed various projects, the document said.

Ceres' overall income was surpassed by the cost of product sales, research costs and administrative expenses, resulting in more than \$29 million in losses in fiscal 2014, according to the documents.

Since the company raised \$65 million with an initial public offering of its stock in early 2012, its share price has dropped from about \$15 to less than 25 cents.

Feds seek input on 305-mile transmission line

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

Federal agencies are seeking input on the plan for a new 305-mile electric transmission line from the Boardman area to a substation southwest of Boise.

The Bureau of Land Management and other agencies are in the midst of an environmental review of the Idaho Power Co. project, because roughly one-third of the transmission line would pass through federally managed public lands. In addition to the BLM, the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Reclamation also manage land along the proposed route.

A draft environmental impact statement that the BLM released Dec. 19 includes suggestions for Idaho Power to alter the proposed route in three locations to minimize environmental impacts, in particular to avoid destruction of sage grouse habitat.

Officials in Oregon and other states have been expecting a decision in 2015 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on whether to list the bird under the Endangered Species Act, although recent a recent bill passed by Congress could delay that decision. Federal lawmakers attached a provision to a recent \$1.1 trillion spending bill, in an attempt to prevent the Interior Department from spending any money on rules to protect the greater sage grouse and three related birds, The Associated Press reported.

The BLM also examined the potential impacts of the transmission line on agriculture, historical resources in the area such as the National Historic Oregon Trail and ongoing use of public lands by American Indian tribes.

The transmission line would add capacity for times of peak demand, and it is one of the transmission projects prioritized

by the Obama administration to improve the power grid and allow for integration of more renewable energy sources, according to the Bureau of Land Management.

Although the White House wants to speed up permitting of transmission projects, the project still faces a lengthy approval process.

The Bureau of Land Management is accepting comments on the draft environmental report. The agency plans to analyze comments and prepare a final environmental document by early 2016. If the power company begins construction in 2018, it could complete the project by 2020.

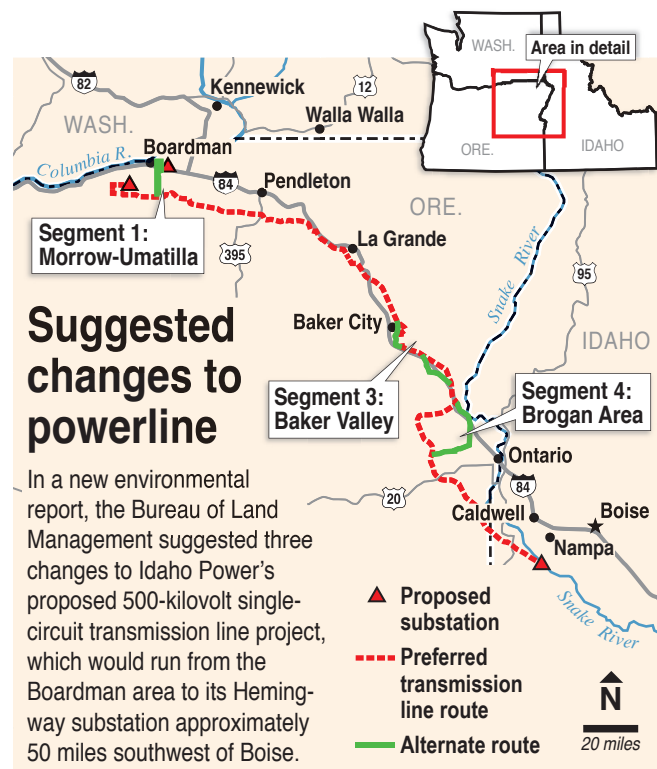
Stephanie McCurdy, a communications specialist with Idaho Power, said the utility is simultaneously going through a process with the Oregon Department of Energy to gain approval for the project. The public will

have an opportunity to comment in Oregon's process once the utility has completed its application.

J.R. Cook, director of a group called the Northeast Oregon Water Association that represents water users in the area, said the route initially proposed by Idaho Power would not have much of an impact on irrigated agriculture in the area. But an alternative route proposed by federal agencies in the draft environmental document would cut through valuable agricultural land.

"It's irreplaceable," Cook said of irrigated farmland that would be affected. "We've stressed the fact you can relocate a line, and you can route around this ground."

It could be difficult for farmers to convince federal agencies that the transmission line should follow a different route, because the transmission line cannot



interfere with activities at the nearby Naval Weapons Systems Training Facility Boardman.

However, Cook said he believes it is still possible to design a better option.