Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Rep. Matt Manweller, R-Ellensburg, leads the debate against a bill to raise Washington's minimum wage to $12 an hour by 2019 during a floor debate March 3 in Olympia. The bill passed on a party-line vote in the Democratic-controlled House.

House passes wage, paid leave bills to uninterested Senate

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Bills to raise the state's minimum wage and mandate paid leave, including for seasonal workers, passed the House Tuesday, but are likely to be shelved in the Senate.

Both bills passed on party-line 51-46 votes in the Democratic-controlled House.

House Bill 1355 would lift Washington's minimum wage to $12 an hour by 2019.

House Bill 1356 would require employers to provide at least 40 hours of paid leave a year. Workers would be eligible for paid leave for sickness, family illnesses, to escape an abuser or stay home with a child whose school or daycare closed because of a public health emergency.

Gov. Jay Inslee issued a statement praising the bills.

"I hope the Senate will act on these bills and follow the House's leadership in building an economy that works for all Washingtonians," he said.

The Senate already has had a chance to act this session on both policies, but didn't. Identical minimum wage and paid leave bills were introduced by Senate Democrats, but the GOP-led Senate Commerce and Labor Committee didn't hold hearings, letting the measures die.

Washington's minimum wage, adjusted each year for inflation, is currently $9.47, already the highest in the country.

Democrats said raising the minimum wage was a moral imperative in an economy in which most minimum-wage worker are adults, many of whom have children to support.

"It's a move in the right direction," said House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan, D-Covington.

Republicans said hiking the wage floor was bad economics and defied the law of supply and demand. Raising labor costs will reduce the demand for it, said Rep. Matt Manweller, R-Ellensburg.

"Unless we have a bill coming from the Flat Earth Society, this is most anti-science bill we will ever have," he said.

Rep. Joe Schmick, R-Colfax, said farmers would have to subtract higher labor costs from their bottomline.

"Agriculture has a problem in the fact that it can't pass the cost along," he said.

Dayton Republican Terry Nealey linked the community's loss of Green Giant a decade ago to the state's nation-leading minimum wage.

The company moved its asparagus canning plant to Peru in 2005. The loss of hundreds of jobs devastated the town, Nealey said.

"We want to keep many Jolly Green Giants alive. Let's turn this bill down," he said.

The Washington Farm Bureau opposed the bill, arguing the state's minimum wage puts producers at a competitive disadvantage against growers in states that follow the federal standard of $7.25.

Under HB 1356, businesses with four to 50 employees would have to provide 40 hours of paid leave, businesses with 50 to 250 would have to provide 56 hours and businesses with more than 250 workers would have to provide 72 hours.

Washington wolf bill passes key committee

Democratic-controlled House budget approves measure

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Legislation calling on the Washington Department of Fish an Wildlife to reopen its wolf recovery plan won approval Friday from a key committee in the Democratic-controlled House.

House Bill 2107 received bipartisan support from the Appropriations Committee. Before passing, it was amended to add another layer of environmental review, which could increase the cost and delay when game managers will finish their review.

The bill must still win approval from the full House and survive final budget negotiations.

The vote was a milestone in an effort by northeast Washington representatives to gain acknowledgment in the House that the reintroduction of wolves has harmed their constituents.

The bill would require state game managers to reconsider the recovery plan in light of the fact wolves are concentrated in northeast Washington and attacking livestock. The current recovery plan calls for wolves to remain on the state's endangered species list until they are more widely dispersed.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

A key Washington legislative committee has approved a bill calling for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife to rewrite its wolf recovery plan.

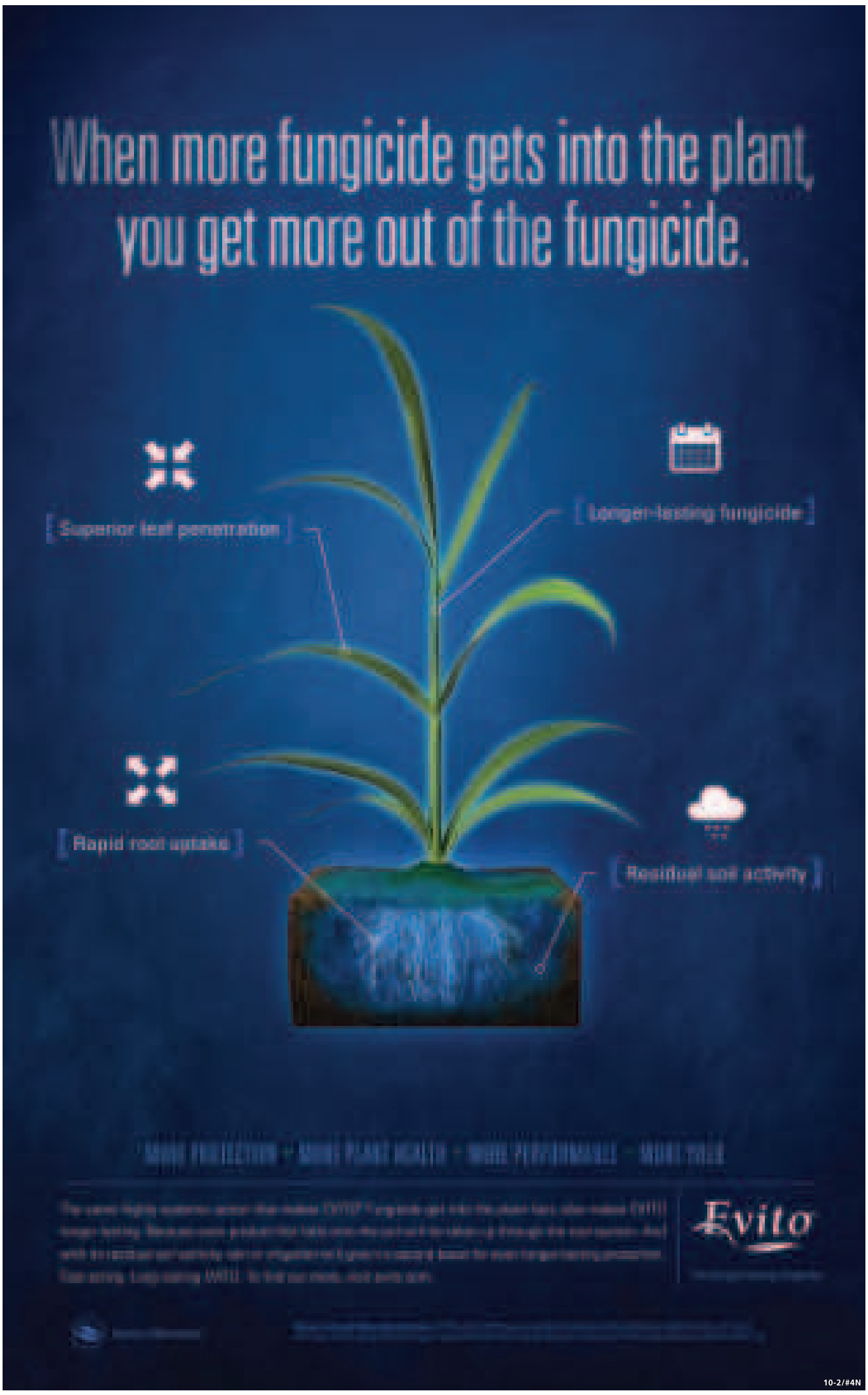
WDFW estimates the recovery may occur by 2021.

HB 2107's prime sponsor, Okanogan County Rep. Joel Kretz, proposed reopening the plan to study how to hasten recovery and to consider how conflicts between wolves and livestock can be reduced.

Before approving the bill, the House Appropriations Committee added a provision that would require WDFW to subject any proposed changes to a review under the State Environmental Policy Act.

Previously, the bill exempted wolf plan revisions from SEPA.

WDFW had estimated revising the plan would cost $420,000. Following SEPA may increase the cost, WDFW wolf policy lead Dave Ware said. "It may or may not add much money," he said.

SEPA also could add time. The bill calls for changes to be made by June 30, 2017. Ware said if required to follow SEPA, the department would want until the end of 2017.

In lobbying for the bill, northeast Washington officials and ranchers told lawmakers it was important for the state to act soon.