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# Opinion

## Editorial Board

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## OUR VIEW

# Proposed Oregon wage hike good for Idaho

Farmers and processors in Eastern Oregon are keeping a close eye on proposals in the Legislature that would increase the state's minimum wage — now \$9.25 — to as high as \$15 an hour over the next few years.

They say if that happens they would have to consider moving operations to nearby Idaho, where the minimum wage is \$7.25.

Owyhee Produce General Manager Shay Myers said that type of increase would make it extremely difficult for Eastern Oregon farmers and agribusinesses to compete with their colleagues across the state line. A \$15 minimum wage would

increase labor costs 62 percent at his company's onion packing shed and farming operations.

"How do we take a 62 percent reduction in what our earnings are ... and think that we can remain in business competitively?" he said.

Myers and other producers say they'd have to cut costs, either through more automation or moving labor-intensive operations to Idaho.

Supporters of a minimum wage hike say they've heard all this before. Oregon has the second-highest minimum wage in the country. Washington state has the highest. They say there hasn't been a noticeable migration of

businesses across the state line.

"We hear these predictions every time we propose raising the minimum wage and yet we don't see that happening," Senate Majority Leader Diane Rosenbaum, D-Portland, said.

A bill she sponsors would increase the minimum wage to \$10.90 next year, and to \$12.12 in 2017. A separate measure in the House calls for a hike to \$11.50 next year, \$13.25 the year after, and \$15 in 2018.

Supporters note that 400,000 low-wage earners in Oregon qualify for government assistance that costs taxpayers \$1.7 billion a year.

Rosenbaum said low-wage earners "work hard at some of the hardest jobs there are and we think these people should earn a wage that is closer to where they can support themselves."

We agree that some of the talk about moving is bluster. The current disparity hasn't pushed many, if any, to move to Idaho. But there's a big difference between \$2 and \$7.

Farmers and packers are price takers, not price makers. They can't just mark up the price of the crop to cover a mandate from Salem — particularly if producers in the next county have such a competitive advantage.

Raise the wage high enough and large operators will find a way to reduce labor costs — move or automate. Small operators and their employees will be forced out.

The way to raise wages is to increase demand for labor, not reduce it. Eliminate the barriers for existing businesses to hire, and on new business from starting in the first place. Put more people to work, and the market will increase their worth.

The emotional appeal of a higher minimum wage is easy to understand. Unfortunately, it doesn't hold up to the laws of economics. The government cannot mandate prosperity.

## OUR VIEW

# Local food is everywhere

Local food is great. What's not to like? Anyone would agree with the statement that buying from the farmer down the road is a good thing.

But during the past decade or so, since the advent of the term "locavore," we have found that "local" is in the eye of the beholder. While some consumers assiduously measure "food miles," others care only whether the food was grown within their state. Still other consumers consider "local" to be a synonym for a region — the Pacific Northwest, the West Coast or even just the West. Others believe "local" equals "Product of the U.S."

And so it goes.

That's why we watched with interest as the Washington House of Representatives passed a bill calling for a "food policy forum" whose job it would be to promote "local" food.

One legislator stated that local food will make people slimmer and healthier.

And, we should add, it'll help them leap tall buildings in a single bound.

The lone advantage of food grown near the consumer is a smaller fuel bill for the truck. Beyond that, it's difficult to see how food grown across the region is any better, or worse, than any other food.

Rep. Vincent Buys, the ranking Republican on the House Agriculture Committee, summarized our thoughts.

"To somehow imply our large-scale agriculture products are unsafe or not as ... high quality as some of the locally produced agriculture products, I think, does a disservice to the state, and I think is offensive to a lot of those farmers who work those long hours and create a high-quality



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

product. They just don't do it on a smaller scale," he said.

Seasonality is another issue. Unless you live in California, try finding a locally grown strawberry in January. Other than what's available from a greenhouse, locally grown strawberries — or many other types of produce — are available only a portion of the year, usually late summer and fall. Some fresh fruits and vegetables store well and are available year-round, but the list is short.

In the meantime, a cornucopia of produce, products and meats are available, no matter what season it is, at the neighborhood grocery store. It is part of a "food system" that offers a vast selection of fresh produce and meats at reasonable prices and is the envy of the world.

Yet some legislators insist that "local" means "better." It's ironic for

anyone, especially legislators, to say that in a state such as Washington, which exports a huge percentage of its crops and products to Asia, Europe, Africa and elsewhere. By arguing that local is better, they are implying that Washington agriculture's overseas customers are in some way getting an inferior product.

Legislators are well-meaning when they chatter about supporting local agriculture, but it should be done in the context of the real world. They need to recognize that wheat and potatoes grown in Eastern Washington are "local" there. Likewise, cherries, apples, pears and hops grown in Central Washington are "local" there, too. All contribute greatly to the "local" Washington economy.

Washington legislators would do best to support all of the state's farmers and ranchers. That's because "local" food is everywhere.

# New approach for supporting ag, protecting resources

By JAMES GOCHÉ  
For the Capital Press

Guest  
comment  
James Goche'



A new and revolutionary project is underway in Thurston County, Wash., aimed at creating a better way to support local agriculture and conserve natural resources.

The Voluntary Stewardship Program was enacted by the Legislature in 2011 to address the rising cost of administering Washington State's Growth Management Act and the counties' critical area ordinances. VSP authorizes counties to create a voluntary process as an alternative to regulation which will protect critical areas while maintaining the viability of agriculture and reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses (see Chap 36.70A RCW). This is revolutionary in at least three ways.

First, counties that "opt in" to VSP agree to ask landowners for their help and then work with them in developing options to conserve natural resources and support agriculture. Counties can resort to regulation and enforcement if voluntary action does not work, but only as a second choice.

Second, VSP provides counties with flexibility and encourages them to develop innovative resource conservation approaches, which address site-specific issues. This flexibility increases the likelihood of voluntary action and better, long-term outcomes.

Third, VSP puts natural resources and agriculture on a co-equal basis as a matter of public policy. It then directs the county to place each on one side of a scale respectively and make sure that a balance is maintained.

Thurston County "opted in" to VSP in 2012 and designated all five of its watersheds as priorities. It was then selected by the Legislature in 2013 as one of two counties (Chelan being the other one) that would receive funding to create VSP pilot projects.

In 2014, Thurston County kicked off its pilot project by appointing a working group of local stakeholders and turning the responsibility of writing a VSP "Work Plan" over to them. These stakeholders, which include representatives of agriculture, environmental organizations, Native American Tribes and other organizations, began their work last May and are using the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service "Nine Points of Conservation Planning" and other source material as a basis for the VSP Work Plan.

The Thurston Conservation District has also stepped forward as a tech-

nical resource to assist the stakeholders and offer its decades of experience in helping local farmers develop "conservation plans" and then find grants or low-cost loans. A first draft of the Work Plan should be available by the end of June.

In short, VSP creates a major and much-needed paradigm shift for conservation planning by making the process collaborative rather than adversarial. By enacting VSP, the Legislature has re-emphasized the importance of local farming and acknowledged the declining effectiveness of adversarial approaches to environmental protection. It is therefore asking counties to rethink their use of regulations and enforcement actions.

It seems that Thurston County has heard the Legislature's message. By opting in to VSP, the County has agreed to do a better job of treating land owners as partners and asking for their help in meeting Growth Management Act and critical area ordinances goals.

One last benefit of VSP is that it will help build community. By creating a voluntary process, VSP challenges us to have the wisdom to work together and the courage to believe that we can do so. It stands for the proposition that there is no "them and us" when it comes to a clean environment or fresh, wholesome food. Indeed, when we find common interest with our neighbors and then do a better job of working together toward mutual goals, we can more effectively support farmers, protect our environment, and make our community a better place to live.

A description of VSP can be found on the Washington Conservation Commission website at <http://sc.wa.gov/voluntary-stewardship/> and the Washington State University Extension's Associate Director for the Division of Governmental Studies and Services, Christina Sanders (360-480-5978 [cmsanders@wsu.edu](mailto:cmsanders@wsu.edu)) is a contact for the VSP Stakeholder process.

*The author runs a small family farm north of Olympia, Wash., and serves as a stakeholder representative on Thurston County's VSP Work Group. In a former life he was a deputy prosecutor who helped Snohomish County, Wash., enforce land use and environmental regulations under the Growth Management Act and other laws.*

# Honoring America's farmers on National Ag Day

By PHIL WARD  
For the Capital Press

Guest  
comment  
Phil Ward



For more than 40 years we have celebrated National Ag Day as a time to pause and honor the American farmer. Today, our farmers are the most productive and efficient in the world with each one helping feed more than 144 people. We thank you, as well as everyone who plays a role in producing the food, fiber and fuel our country and the world depends upon.

This year National Ag Week is March 15-21 and was highlighted by National Ag Day on Wednesday, March 18.

And there is another very important date in March we want to remind farmers about this year. March 31 is the last day to make several important choices on federal safety net programs that could make a

big difference for their farms through 2018.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency is urging farmers and landowners across the nation to finalize their decisions by March 31 on updating crop yield histories and reallocating base acres for new safety net programs established by the 2014 Farm Bill, known as Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC). Updated yields and base acre reallocations could help improve a farmer's potential to recover payments when a weather disaster or unexpected changes in the marketplace negatively affects their

income.

March 31 is also the last day to decide which program — ARC or PLC — is the right one for their operation. Each program provides unique protections. The best choice will depend on factors specific to their individual farm.

FSA, in cooperation with a number of universities, has provided online web-based tools, found at [www.fsa.usda.gov/arc-plc](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/arc-plc) to help make this important decision. The online tools have already helped more than half a million farmers so far.

If you have not yet considered your PLC or ARC options, take the time today to explore the web tools and then contact your FSA county office if you have questions. Celebrate Ag Day and Ag Week with the peace of mind knowing your farm will be protected as you make plans

to enter the fields this spring.

If you don't make a decision by the March 31 deadline, then you will be assigned Price Loss Coverage, the default program, and lose payments for losses incurred in 2014. However, if you complete your ARC or PLC election by the deadline, you will be protected against 2014 price or revenue losses.

Don't let this opportunity slip by. Finalize your yield or base acre decisions, complete those conversations between landowners and producers, and conduct your final reviews to determine how ARC or PLC can help you. Avoid that end-of-the-month rush, and make an appointment today. Your Oregon FSA county staff is standing by ready to help.

*Phil Ward is state executive director of the Oregon Farm Service Agency.*