

Oregon

Lawmakers ponder increase in farm-to-school grants

Legislation would make grants non-competitive

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A nearly five-fold increase in Oregon farm-to-school funding has cleared its first hurdle in the state legislature.

On March 19, the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land Use and Water voted to approve the legislation, which increases farm-to-school funding from \$1.2 million to \$5.6 million per biennium.

House Bill 2721 has now been referred to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means with a unanimous "do-pass" recommendation.

Apart from boosting the total amount of money that schools can use to buy food from Oregon producers, the bill also changes the program

to make grants available on a non-competitive basis.

Schools currently compete for farm-to-school funds but many find that the process of applying for the grant is too burdensome, said Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem. "We want to remove barriers."

While the amount of per-meal assistance to schools would be lower, the bill would make the program available to everyone, he said. The bill also allows schools to use grant funds for all meals, not just lunches.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said the legislation marks the evolution of a program that "masterfully connects" education and agriculture in Oregon.

"This is the next phase of this program," she said during a March 19 hearing before the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land Use and Water.

Roughly \$4.6 million would

be disbursed to schools on a non-competitive process based on the number of meals they serve.

Some \$900,000 in competitive grant funds would be available to schools and other organizations that conduct food-related education and about \$100,000 would be used to administer the program.

Since the legislature launched the program in 2011, 26 school districts have been awarded grant money, according to supporters.

Supporters claim the program encourages children to eat more healthful foods while providing Oregon farmers with a meaningful source of income.

Aside from directly stimulating local food sales, the program can change long-term buying habits and inspire parents to buy frozen and canned products from Oregon companies, said Molly McCargar of Pearmine Farms near Gervais, Ore.

Electric ATV plays many roles, including robotic farm dog

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

NEWBERG, ORE. — Melissa Brandao says she takes an evangelistic approach to marketing her electric ATV, complete with toiling in the vineyards. Maybe substituting sustainability for salvation when customers get to the precision ag promised land.

Brandao is founder and CEO of Rogue Rovers LLP, and her product is called the FarmDogg, a battery-powered vehicle that will be capable of collecting crop data, powering implements and autonomously accompanying workers up a vineyard or orchard row.

Brandao demonstrated the vehicle at Adelsheim Vineyard in Newberg and planned a trip to a cherry orchard in The Dalles. The prototype, nicknamed "Sparky," has a body inspired by the Willy's Jeeps of World War II fame. Test drivers found it to have quick acceleration with somewhat twitchy steering, but overall were impressed if not yet ready to buy.

"Very nice," said vineyard manager Chad Vargas after a spin around the Adelsheim parking lot.

"I'm going to take it up in the vineyard," he said later. "Enough with this asphalt stuff."

Vargas said ATVs are the vineyard's workhorse, used for chores such as spraying, hauling water to crews and even hazing birds. Precision agriculture, sustainability and efficiency are the buzzwords of the day, however, and the vineyard is interested in technology and entrepreneurs that



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Chad Vargas, manager of Adelsheim Vineyard near Newberg, Ore., tries out an electric ATV during a demonstration March 19. The vehicle can be outfitted with data collectors and can operate robotically.

can advance those concepts. Eliminating emissions from gas-powered vehicles is a desirable goal.

Brandao believes her vehicle can do all that and more. The FarmDogg is powered by lithium-ion batteries that in the prototype provide four to six hours riding time and can be recharged in a couple hours by plugging in a cord. Other tools can be plugged into it, anything from "a laptop, a weed whacker or what have you," Brandao said.

It can be equipped with sensors, upload data, be programmed to ferry tools and supplies and can zip up to 25 mph.

"The idea was to build a vehicle that's a platform," Brandao said.

The company hopes to take orders from vineyards and orchards and begin production in late summer or fall, she said. The base price is projected at \$10,000. The vehicles will be assembled

in Ashland; some of the parts and components, including the knobby tires, are made in Oregon.

Brandao said the FarmDogg is a work in progress. A robotics firm with military contracting experience has expressed interest in working with her, she said, and Rogue Rovers is prepping for an appearance on "Shark Tank," the TV reality show in which entrepreneurs try to win financial backing from a panel of moguls. Brandao said she's hoping a grant from Drive Oregon, a non-profit established by state government to promote electric vehicles, will subsidize production and reduce retail costs.

She's confident the vehicles will find a market among farmers, who are quick to use technology that can save them time and money.

"It's an Oregon story," Brandao said. "We're pioneers, we're early adopters."

Brown keeps water train moving

EO Media Group

PENDLETON, Ore. — The \$51.6 million Columbia River water development fund is among Gov. Kate Brown's top priorities this session, and she said Friday she hopes to see the budget item approved by the end of April.

During a meeting with the *East Oregonian* editorial board, Brown said she is urging the legislature to "move quickly" on a package that would provide funding to expand irrigation in the Columbia Basin.

The expenditure was included in former Gov. John Kitzhaber's proposed budget, which is now being discussed by the Ways and Means Committee. Brown, who replaced Kitzhaber on Feb. 18, said the biggest hurdle to getting the development fund approved would be if the fund becomes a bargaining chip. She said she is encouraging leadership



During a visit to Pendleton, Ore., Friday, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said the \$51.6 million Columbia River water development fund is among her top priorities.

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to pass the funding early in the session and let other pieces of the budget be decided from there.

State Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, said the Senate is supportive of the project and willing to carve out the dollars early, but he's not so sure about the House. He said Brown's visit east is a show of support, and he hopes that when she returns to the capitol she will help finalize the funding.

The \$51.6 million would help fund a three-phase plan developed by the Northeast

Oregon Water Association that would allow farmers to pump extra water from the Columbia Basin and also fund upstream projects that would help restore native fish runs. The plan could put 200,000 acres of farmland into production in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

Richard Whitman, who served as Kitzhaber's top natural resources advisor, has continued his role in Brown's office. He traveled with the governor this week and said he has a high level of comfort in the policy that has been presented to lawmakers.

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