

OUR VIEW

Do the public’s business in public, every time

The public’s business should be done — in public.

That is a statement of the obvious, and the intent of every opening meetings law.

In Washington state, the legislature has determined that “the people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know.”

Every other state has a similar law on the books, as does the federal government. Yet, time and again, the public is reminded that such a right is tenuous at best. Time and again, officials decide that open meetings are inconvenient, embarrassing or in some way would cause people to be less forthcoming than they might be in a secret meeting.

Bunk.

We defy any public official anywhere to find an adult who cannot bear the “pressure” of speaking his or her opinion on any public issue. In the U.S., every citizen is imbued with the right to speak out without fear of retribution. It is un-American to believe otherwise.

Most recently, a high-paid consultant proposed that the state’s Wolf Advisory Group meet in private, the theory being that the 18 members of the group would be more likely to speak their mind if no one outside the group knew what they said. She also wanted members of the advisory group to develop some sort of relationship.

That is not the purpose of such groups. The purpose is to address a public issue — managing wolves in Washington.

We have been covering the reintroduction of wolves into the Pacific Northwest since the first ones were moved from Canada to Idaho and Yellowstone National Park in the 1990s. During that time, we have interviewed hundreds of state and federal officials, experts, ranchers, farmers, activists and others about wolves. We have not found a single person who was shy about offering an opinion. Not one.

Yet, for some reason, this meeting would be different. According to the consultant, the shrinking violets would stutter and stumble and self-edit to the point of not saying what they think.

Our solution to that conjecture: If, for some reason, they are unable to address the public’s business in public, they should be replaced. If the consultant is unwilling to do the public’s business in public, she should be replaced, too.

As of this writing, state officials were discussing the propriety of closing the advisory group’s meeting. We assume that they came to their senses and allowed the light of public access to shine in. They probably read the Wolf Advisory Group Guidelines, which, in part, say: “Meetings will be open to the general public.”

Such occasions — the closing of public meetings — occur all too frequently. Public officials, particularly at the federal and state levels, find it much more convenient to operate in secret. Some years back, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was considering tightening its rules on dust. Agency officials traveled around the country meeting with farm groups and others on this top-secret issue. For no reason at all, the meetings were secret, to the point that one of our reporters was kicked out of a meeting in Spokane. It wasn’t because the farm groups wanted them closed. In fact, everyone we interviewed afterward said they would have preferred that they be open to the public.

Our conclusion: It was just the EPA’s way of thumbing its nose at the public and its right to know.

For the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife even to consider such a slap at the people’s right know is an affront to every citizen in that state.

Here’s a rule of thumb for our hard-working friends in government: If a meeting involves spending public money to talk about a public issue it better darn well be open to the public.

That’s what the law says, and that’s what the public demands.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

OUR VIEW

Students looking to expand job prospects should turn to ag

At this time of year our thoughts often turn to college commencement ceremonies and the job prospects for newly minted graduates.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York reports that the Class of 2015 has a better chance than any class in recent years of finding employment, as listings for jobs that require at least a bachelor’s degree are up 10 percent over last year. That’s at least a little good news for recent grads who, diploma in hand, are now out in the world.

But where are these jobs? Ask anyone who four years ago chose to major in any number of ag and natural resource fields.

Last week the Department of Agriculture released a study that predicts there will be 58,000 job openings in the U.S. annually through 2020 in food, agriculture, natural resources and environmental fields — and not nearly enough college graduates to fill them. By the USDA’s estimate, only 35,000 grads will be available each year.

Demand is particularly strong for students with experience in math, engineering, science or technology.

It’s already a seller’s market, according to officials at ag schools throughout the West.

Officials at Washington State University say many of their grads this spring had multiple job offers. At Oregon State University, job placement has been particularly strong for graduates with crop and soil science, horticulture and animal and rangeland science degrees.

Ag, food, renewable natural resources and environmental degrees are hot at the University of Idaho.

Agriculture is an industry ever more dependent on improved technology — new seed varieties, mechanized harvesters, advanced irrigation equipment, sophisticated sensors, etc. — to meet demanding climate and labor challenges.

Agriculture — literally a home-grown industry — provides huge opportunities for talented young people looking for challenging, rewarding careers in a vital, robust sector of the economy. For every farmer and rancher in the field there is a need for many more engineers, manufacturers, processors, marketers and other support personnel.

Officials in Idaho recently talked about creating a “Silicon Valley of Agriculture,” concentrating research and technology along the Snake River. Other states have considered similar ideas. It makes sense for states with large ag sectors to figure out ways to grow local economies by building on an already viable resource.

Rural America has long suffered from out migration. Young people head to college and don’t come back because there aren’t enough opportunities at home. Encouraging these students to pursue agriculture careers and preparing them to take these unfilled jobs could help turn back the tide.

Genetically engineered right-to-know act unneeded

By ALISHA SHURR
For the Capital Press

Twenty-three years ago the U.S. Food and Drug Administration made a ground-breaking ruling on genetically engineered foods: They do not require a label.

“Bioengineered foods did not meaningfully differ in substance or safety from other foods grown by traditional plant breeding process,” the FDA’s statement said.

Since then, genetic engineering has developed and been used worldwide. More than 1,700 studies have been performed to determine their effects and safety, but now there is a movement in the United States to label GE foods.

The GE Right-to-Know Act was reintroduced in the U.S. Senate by Barbara Boxer, California Democrat, and in the House by Peter DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat, on Feb. 5. The bills have been referred to committees.

“Consumers have a right to know what is in the foods they eat and parents have a right to know what they are feeding their families,” Boxer stated in a press release after the introduction of S 809.

When DeFazio introduced HR 1699, he said, “We cannot continue to keep Americans in the dark about the food they eat.

“More than 60 other countries make it easy for consumers to choose. Why should the U.S. be any different? If food manufacturers stand by their product and the technology they use to make it, they should have no problem disclosing that information to consumers.”

Before the labeling debate can be fully analyzed, it is vital to understand that there is a difference between genetic engineering and the more common term, genetically modified organism.

The USDA prefers the term genetic engineering. According to the USDA, genetic engineering is “a range of tools, including traditional breeding techniques, that alter living organisms, or parts of organisms, to make or modify products; improve plant or animals; or develop microorganisms for specific agricultural uses.”

Yet, most people still use the term GMO.

Googling “genetic engineering” brings results for “Genetic Engineering: Greenpeace International,” “What is genetic engineering: AgBioSafety,” and similar sites.

However, when using “GMO” the first three results are “GMO Facts: The Non-GMO Project,” “10 Reasons to Avoid GMOs” and “Say

Guest
comment
Alisha Shurr



No to GMOs!”

Robert Fraley, the executive vice president and chief technology officer for Monsanto, lectured at Kansas State University on Jan. 26, stating, “When we first developed these technologies (genetic engineering) we talked to farmers. We ignored the consumer and now they think we are hiding something.”

Sean Fox, professor at K-State in agricultural economics, noted, “the Internet can easily be misleading and it is being utilized in the campaign to require mandatory labeling of GE products.”

For example, Boxer and Defazio in a joint press release stated “more than 90 percent of consumers support labeling of genetically engineered foods. Also, The Sleuth Journal published a demographic that stated only 4 percent of Americans oppose GMO labeling. Neither of those two statements cited a specific study or survey.

In direct contradiction to both statements, Colorado, Oregon and Washington voted down ballot measures that would have required the mandatory labeling of GMOs.

The Council for Agricultural Science and Technology published a paper titled, “The Potential Impacts of Labeling for Genetically Engineered Food in the United States” written by four scientists and experts, and reviewed by five more. The study researched arguments for and against labels, costs involved, other countries’ experiences and potential legal ramifications. They concluded five main points:

- There is no science-based reason to single out GE foods and feeds for mandatory process-based labeling.
- Mandatory labeling based on process abandons the traditional U.S. practice of providing for consumer food preferences through voluntary product differentiation and labeling.
- Market-driven voluntary labeling measures are currently providing consumers with non-GE choices.
- Mandatory labeling could have negative implications for First Amendment rights and trade issues.
- Mandatory labeling will increase food costs.

Forbes magazine published an article, “The Debate about GMO Safety is Over, Thanks to a New Trillion-Meal Study.” Not only did the article cite over 2,000 previous studies that concluded GE poses no threat to human health and that GE

foods are as safe as conventional foods but focused on a study that reviewed 29 years of livestock productivity and health data from before and after the introduction of GE foods. Looking at more than 100 billion animals between 1996 (animal feed then was 100 percent non-GE) and now (90 percent of animal feed contains GE), the result was no unusual health difference. The article states, “the debate is over, GMOs are safe.”

“To label GE food it would be perceived as lower quality and perceived as posing a risk. So GE technology would probably get phased out and that would be detrimental,” according to Fox, the K-State professor. “(For example) we have a mandatory label in this country for a process called food irradiation and the consequence of that is that we don’t have many irradiated foods — a technology I personally believe has the potential to save lives.”

Fox also points out that there already is an outlet for consumers seeking non-GE foods, “By definition, organic foods cannot be produced with GM ingredients.” Organic allows those who want GE-free food the opportunity to purchase them without imposing potential costs on the rest of the population.

A report published by Colorado State University detailing the effects of GE labeling stated, “The cost of labeling involves far more than the paper and ink to print the actual label. Accurate labeling requires an extensive identity preservation system from farmer to elevator to grain processor to food manufacturer to retailer. Either testing or detailed record-keeping needs to be done at various steps along the food supply chain.”

Estimates of the costs of mandatory labeling vary from a few dollars per person per year to 10 percent of a consumer’s food bill.

In a recent study released by the Pew Research Center in cooperation with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 88 percent of AAAS scientists believe eating genetically modified food is safe and that labeling is not in the consumer’s interest despite Boxer’s statement that “consumers have a right to know what is in the foods they eat and parents have a right to know what they are feeding their families.”

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