

Flat minimum wage invigorates advocates

Pressure for wage floor hike expected to increase in Oregon

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon’s minimum wage won’t rise in 2016, which is expected to save money for farms and other businesses but also invigorate advocates of a higher rate.

Due to stagnant inflation, as measured by the federal “consumer price index” for urban areas, the state’s Bureau of Labor and Industries will keep the minimum wage at \$9.25 per hour next year.

Both supporters and opponents of a higher wage floor believe that the flat rate will be used as an argument in favor of a substantial increase.

“It’s a mixed blessing, politically,” said Jenny Dresler, state public policy director for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

While it should be good news for low-income workers that prices aren’t rising sharply, the unchanged minimum wage will likely spur political action, said Steve Buckstein, senior policy analyst for the Cascade Policy Institute, a free market think tank.

“It probably will increase pressure in the legislature, or through a ballot initiative, to raise the minimum wage next year,” he said. “Both efforts will be bolstered politically by the fact the minimum wage is staying flat.”

Proponents say the unchanged rate is based on a nationwide measurement of inflation and doesn’t reflect unique factors, such as increased housing costs, seen in Portland and elsewhere in Oregon.

“To bring people out of poverty, we need at least \$15 and in places like Portland, more than that,” said Jamie Patridge, chief petitioner for a 2016 ballot initiative to raise the minimum wage.

Patridge said he was disappointed by the flat rate but acknowledged that it will likely convince people that the current inflation-based system is inadequate and persuade them to take action at

the ballot box.

“It’s probably positive for our campaign but negative for low-wage workers,” he said. “Workers should not be living in poverty. Every worker should be paid a living wage.”

The Oregon Center for Public Policy, a non-profit that supports increasing the minimum wage, said the rate would be \$19 per hour if it had tracked worker productivity for the past half-century.

“We’re seeing growing support for some action,” Tyler Mac Innis, policy analyst for OCPP.

To achieve economic security in Oregon, a single adult with a child needs to earn roughly \$45,000-

\$51,000 per year, depending on the region, according to the group. With the current minimum wage, a worker earns \$19,240 per year.

“It’s certainly not good news that it’s staying flat. It highlights the fact minimum wage workers need a significant increase in the minimum wage,” said Mac Innis.

Dresler, of the Oregon Farm Bureau, counters that farmers in the state compete against others in the U.S. and internationally, so a higher minimum wage puts them at a disadvantage.

Oregon already has the second highest minimum wage in the nation behind Washington, she said.

“That keeps us less competitive than it does our

neighbors” in the Midwest and South, Dresler said.

Farms in Oregon are currently highly diverse, but a major hike in the minimum wage would likely convince growers to transition to crops that are less labor intensive, she said. “That would be one of the reactions to that sort of increase.”

Other types of companies will have to raise prices, lay off workers or reduce benefits to cope with a higher minimum wage — or they’ll simply go out of business, said Buckstein of the Cascade Policy Institute.

“There are always unintended consequences,” he said. “There’s no magic pot of money that businesses have to pay more wages.”

OSU breeding network connects farmers, chefs

Chefs provide input on desirable vegetable attributes

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

AURORA, Ore. — In considering the ideal vegetable, a farmer will often desire different attributes than a chef.

Yields and disease resistance are generally top of mind for the farmer, while the chef may focus on flavor and appearance.

The Culinary Breeding Network, managed by Oregon State University, aims to help plant breeders bridge this divide by getting farmers and chefs to communicate what they’re looking for in a vegetable.

“There’s a lot of power in bringing these people into the same room together,” said Lane Selman, an OSU agricultural researcher who helped start the network.

The network organizes events such as the upcoming vegetable variety showcase, scheduled for Sept. 28 in Portland, where the participants from various sectors of the food industry can compare notes on new cultivars.

“A lot of it is focused on flavor and culinary applications,” said Timothy Wastell, a chef who consults for the network.

The network was spawned in 2009, after breeder Frank Morton of Wild Garden Seed released open-pollinated new pepper varieties to replace a popular hybrid cultivar that was discontinued.

Seed companies frequently drop hybrid vegetable varieties if they don’t generate enough sales, even if the cultivars are important to some



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Participants at a recent Oregon State University vegetable trial field day examine new tomato varieties. The Culinary Breeding Network, which is managed by OSU, aims to connect chefs, farmers and breeders to zero in on desirable vegetable traits.

growers, said Selman.

Open pollination allows farmers to save seed, as they’re not dependent on the two parent cultivars used to produce hybrids.

When Morton developed several new pepper varieties, chefs tended to prefer those without a sunken stem, as it eases cutting in a busy kitchen environment.

“These are things plant breeders don’t necessarily think about,” said Wastell.

The episode convinced breeders and OSU that chefs and retailers should be involved in the variety development in an organized manner.

“We started realizing, ‘Wow, this is something missing,’” Selman said. “We know what farmers want, but we don’t know what end users want.”

Breeders often focus on developing cultivars that are “true to type” — that fit the vegetables’ traditional characteristics — but these traits may not necessarily be important to buyers, she said.

By getting input from chefs and other end users, the breeders can incorporate information that wouldn’t otherwise be on their radar,

Selman said.

Flavor and other attributes that are important to chefs don’t conflict with agronomic qualities because the Culinary Breeding Network doesn’t showcase varieties that would be unappealing to growers, she said. “I don’t bring the dogs in.”

Oregon State University is involved in other cooperative programs with seed producers.

The university is paid by several seed companies to grow out vegetable varieties at its North Willamette Research and Extension Center in Aurora, Ore.

The plots serve as a “learning farm” for new growers while providing breeders with information about how the cultivars perform at that location, said Nick Andrews, small farms extension agent at OSU.

Unlike a farmer, OSU doesn’t harvest the vegetables, which allows seed companies to see how well plants hold up in the field past maturity, he said.

Seed companies can also bring their customers to the location to demonstrate new varieties, Andrews said. “It’s a public location.”

Irrigation district to wrap season at 60 percent used

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

KENNEWICK, Wash. — Kennewick Irrigation District will end water deliveries Oct. 11, using about 60 percent of the water it would use in a non-drought year.

“Everyone was curtailed. We had challenges,” said Chuck Freeman, district manager.

Six times during the summer the Yakima River was so low that the district cut off water to cemeteries, parks and schools, he said. Cutoffs were for about a week each time.

Agricultural lands were reduced at one point to 3 gallons per minute per acre, down

from 8 gallons per minute.

Orchards, vineyards and blueberry fields make up about 9,000 acres, almost half the district’s 20,201 acres. The rest is urban.

In a normal year, the district uses 102,674 acre-feet of water and finishes deliveries in mid-October.

The district is at the end of the 175-mile U.S. Bureau of Reclamation irrigation system serving the Yakima Basin and is fed by five reservoirs in the Cascade Mountains. It’s a return-flow district, meaning all its water comes from operational spills and seepage from other districts upriver.

That made Freeman nervous at the start of this

drought year, but now he concludes that overall things went fairly well despite some “big stresses” and “very concerned farmers.”

A lot of fields went fallow and a lot of water transfers were made from one grower to another within the district, he said.

One grower paid \$80,000 in past-due district water bills to get a water transfer, he said.

The vast majority of 23,000 city customers complied with reductions, but the district issued warning notices to 200 who did not, Freeman said. All of those complied before they were fined, he said.

Yakima reservoir levels likely to be half of normal by end of season

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — The five water reservoirs serving the Yakima Basin will be holding somewhere around 50 percent less water than normal at the end of the irrigation season in about a month.

As of Sept. 14, the reservoirs were 24 percent full, which was 66.2 percent of average for this time of year. The average is based on a 30-year average from 1981 to 2010, according to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in Yakima.

The bureau manages the Yakima Basin Project, which provides water to 464,000 acres of farmland through irrigation districts in the Kittitas and Yakima valleys.

The reservoirs store a little more than 1 million acre-feet of water when full, which is about half the water needs of the basin. The other half comes from snowpack not retained in the reservoirs that was very light this year due to drought.

In July, Quentin Kreuter, the bureau’s Yakima River operator, said the target was to end the irrigation season Oct. 20 with 135,000 acre-feet in storage, down from a normal 250,000 to 300,000.

On Sept. 15, the bureau’s hydrologist for the Yakima Basin Project, Chris Lynch, said it still looks like there will be close to 135,000 acre-feet left on Oct. 20.

It could be anywhere from 125,000 to 150,000, depending on rainfall between now and then, Lynch said.

A year ago, there was 330,000 acre-feet at the end of the season and it’s been above normal — 270,000 acre-feet — for most of the last five years, he said.

It usually takes all winter to fill the reservoirs, and there is no need to release any water from them prior to early June for irrigation. This year irrigation usage began in April because of the light snowpack.

To start winter recharge from such a low point is a concern.

“A bird in the hand is always good and we don’t have a bird in the hand. I’m not even sure if we even have one in the bush,” Lynch said.

Reservoir inflows fell to 25 to 29 percent of average in July, Kreuter said. Now they are about 80 percent of average, given recent rains.

Lynch said one weather forecaster he relies on believes rain and snowfall will be decent this winter, but that the Climate Prediction Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is predicting a greater chance of warmer than average temperatures and below normal precipitation for the middle section of Washington and the Northwest.

“I don’t know why the climate center is leaning drier than normal. A big factor will be temperatures and where the freezing level is,” said Scott Pattee, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service water supply specialist for Washington.

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