

Oregon farm regulators approve dairy expansions

Proposals to increase herd sizes proved controversial

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Oregon farm regulators have cleared the expansion of four dairies classified as “confined animal feeding operations” over the objections of vegans and animal welfare proponents.

Earlier this year, five dairies requested that the Oregon Department of Agriculture approve changes to their waste management plans, with four of those facilities seeking to increase their herds.

While such requests are usually routine, the expansion proposals attracted the attention of critics who complained the larger dairies will increase pollution, harm air quality, spur more antibiotic usage and lead to animal welfare abuses.

Many of these objections were heard during an ODA public meeting in September 2015, and critics also submitted written comments about the modified plans.

In a response to comments, ODA explained that it’s role is limited to water quality concerns. Complaints about air quality, animal welfare and



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Arlene Webb, an opponent of several proposed dairy expansions in Oregon, speaks during a Sept. 2 hearing in Salem, Ore., in this Capital Press file photo. The Oregon Department of Agriculture regulates Confined Animal Feeding Operations under the federal Clean Water Act and has now approved the expansions.

antibiotic usage are outside its jurisdiction in enforcing the federal Clean Water Act.

“Most of the comments were not pertinent to our permit,” said Wym Matthews, manager of the agency’s CAFO program, noting that this fact probably won’t appease critics. “They probably will not be happy with our response.”

However, the agency will impose new conditions on the five dairies, which are located in Tillamook, Marion, Coos and Klamath counties.

In fields where manure is applied, the dairies will have

to test soil nutrients annually instead of every five years. Those tests must also specifically check the soil’s nitrate levels, in addition to total nitrogen and phosphorous levels.

Dairies were previously required to only check for total nitrogen and phosphorous, but they must now break out nitrates because federal standards set limits for that particular soluble nutrient in drinking water, said Matthews.

While these conditions will currently apply only to the five dairies that requested waste management plan changes, ODA is in the process of up-

dating its overall Clean Water Act permit for CAFOs, which will require other facilities to also comply with these measures later in 2016, he said.

Friends of Family Farmers, a non-profit group that submitted comments about water quality concerns, is heartened that soil tests will check specifically for nitrates and that samples will now be taken more frequently, which is aimed at preventing excessive nutrient buildup.

“Those were all issues we had flagged. We were making sure they weren’t engaged in a rubber-stamp exercise,” said Ivan Maluski, the group’s policy director. “I think it’s encouraging they included our suggestions.”

Any new regulatory requirements create challenges for dairies, particularly smaller ones without many employees, but producers tend to be agile in meeting such standards, said Tammy Dennee, assistant director of the Oregon Dairy Farmers Association.

As for the controversy over the expansions, Dennee said it’s hard to say whether to expect similar objections in the future.

“Unfortunately, it was much to do about very little,” she said.

Oregon expects to issue new industrial hemp licenses

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

The Oregon Department of Agriculture expects to resume issuing licenses to grow industrial hemp in 2016 by the end of February, but some problems continue to dog the new crop.

The state issued 11 hemp licenses in 2015 before cutting off the process in August. Nine of the licensees planted a crop and three harvested a product, said Lindsay Eng, ODA’s program manager. But the crops of two other growers, one in Grants Pass and one in Bend, are embargoed because the plants exceeded the .3 percent THC limit required under state law, Eng said. The crops will have to be destroyed or remediated in some way, she said, perhaps by using the plant stalks without the flowers or seeds.

Industrial hemp is related to marijuana, but doesn’t contain nearly the level of THC, the chemical compound that

makes pot users high. Instead, advocates say industrial hemp fiber and oil can be used to make clothing, food, rope, cosmetics, plastics and other products. They’ve long said hemp could replace cotton or petroleum in some uses.

Ag researchers say some conventional farmers might eventually be interested in growing hemp as a rotational crop, but for now the market appears to involve small-scale farmers who want to process hemp themselves to make lotions or other products.

Eng said details in Oregon’s hemp law may need tweaking by the Legislature when it meets in February. A section requiring 2.5-acre hemp plots causes some growers problems, as does a requirement that the plants be directly seeded instead of started in greenhouse pots. In addition, it’s hard to obtain seed, Eng said. Canada is the most common source.

Okanogan Farm Bureau leader: Treatment of Hammonds ‘outrageous, hypocritical’

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OKANOGAN, Wash. — It’s “outrageous and hypocritical” that the federal government imprisoned two Oregon ranchers for a backburn that got away from them and burned a little over 100 acres of public land while federal and state agencies backburned thousands of acres of private land in Okanogan County last summer and were not held accountable, the president of the Okanogan County Farm Bureau says.

“My definition of homeland security is America’s ability to feed itself. There is nothing more important. America has to stop the war on agriculture,” said Nicole Kuchenbuch, 36, Okanogan County Farm Bureau president.

“If this nation’s farmers and ranchers are forced out of business, America has succeeded in staging her own famine,” Kuchenbuch said.

“The media tendency is to turn things into racial or socio-economic issues and vilify ranchers as a bunch of ignorant honkies. It’s important to realize the American government is oppressive to all colors of people and everyone just wants to be free, healthy and prosperous,” she said.

Incidents such as ranchers and militia occupying a seasonally closed national wildlife refuge near Burns, Ore., happen when people feel so “abused” by government that “they feel they have no other choice,” Kuchenbuch said.

“I don’t agree with having a standoff, but they captured the attention of the United States,” she said.

The re-sentencing of Harney County, Ore., ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond to five years in prison is just one of many examples throughout ranching areas of the West in the last several decades of the heavy handedness of federal agencies in acquiring more land and squeezing out ranches to satisfy environmentalists who want a national park from the Yukon to Yellowstone, Kuchenbuch said.

The government agencies deny squeezing ranches.

It’s not coincidence that agencies have bought many Okanogan County ranches and that there have been problems between the government and ranchers in Nevada and other Western states, she said.

“We believe they are systematically squeezing us out. They use every means possible. Direct buyouts, conser-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Burned grazing ground is shown in Okanogan County, Wash., on Aug. 31, 2015, after the Okanogan fire. The head of the county Farm Bureau voiced her frustration with the way ranchers were treated during the last two years of fires in the county, and how two Oregon ranchers were treated in a court case.

vation easements, fire, sage grouse and wolves. The Endangered Species Act. Sometimes they pay 10 times the market value and every parcel sold jeopardizes those left,” Kuchenbuch said.

“We do not trust that they will leave people alone, as witnessed with the Hammond family,” she said.

A couple dozen ranches have been burned out by wildfires that burned more than 1 million acres of Okanogan County in the past two summers. State and federal grazing allotments cover 50 to 80 percent of that, Jack Field, executive vice president of the Washington Cattlemen’s Association, has said. Ranchers are hard-pressed to find grazing land. One-third of 600,000 acres burned in the Okanogan, Tunk Block and North Star fires in 2015 was caused by agency backburning, Okanogan County Commissioner Jim DeTro has said.

Ranches in several parts of the county lost private timber, grazing grounds, hay, barns and equipment to agency backburning that ranchers opposed.

Kuchenbuch, her husband, Casey, and her father, Rod Haeberle, fought a fire alongside firefighters on their ranch last summer and begged them not to backburn 1,000 acres of their private land.

The agency did it anyway to protect homes but jeopardizing people and livestock and destroying Haeberle Ranch timber, miles of fencing, the family’s mountain cabin and a set of corrals.

“We were told afterward that there is no restitution for our losses,” Kuchenbuch said.

Backburning is so touchy that agencies don’t talk about it on their radios, rather commands are given in person, she said.

The homes could have been protected had the USFS

allowed the Kuchenbuchs and Gebbers Farms to continue building a firebreak from private ranch land onto USFS property, she said. But the agency never fought the fire offensively, only defended homes, she said.

The USFS has said it doesn’t attack fires when it’s not safe to do so but that its goal in the Okanogan was to put them out.

Protecting towns was the priority and fire resources were spread so thin that rural residents were left to fend for themselves in many places, Kuchenbuch said.

When that happens, they don’t have time to wonder whether a backburn they do or other efforts are legal, she said.

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