

Washington AG opens probe into wage survey advice

WAFLA ordered to turn over its records

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

The Washington attorney general has opened an investigation of a farm labor contractor whose advice to growers on answering a wage survey drew the ire of unions and workers-rights groups.

Investigators will look into whether WAFLA, formerly known as the Washington Farm Labor Association, violated state or federal laws regarding unfair business practices or restraint of trade. WAFLA is a major supplier of seasonal H-2A farmworkers in Washington.

In a letter to WAFLA, the attorney general's office demanded a wide range of documents related to contacts WAFLA has had with farmers about the H-2A program, the wage survey and employing domestic workers.

"We're not apologizing for any-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Workers pick apples in Washington state. The state attorney general's office has opened an investigation into whether a farm labor contractor broke laws by suggesting how growers answer a wage survey.

thing we did because we didn't do anything wrong," WAFLA's director, Dan Fazio, said Jan. 8. "I don't think we broke the law with the survey, and I don't think we broke the law with any other services."

The state Employment Security

Department, in a briefing paper Dec. 22, said WAFLA biased a wage survey by advising growers to report that they pay hourly wages instead of piece-rates.

WAFLA defended its advice, noting the survey made farmers choose between reporting hourly wages or piece-rates at the peak of the harvest.

WAFLA warned farmers that reporting piece-rates paid when demand for labor is highest could artificially inflate prevailing wages and form the basis for setting mandatory piece-rates for the entire season.

ESD concluded WAFLA's advice skewed lower how much workers earn picking Granny Smith, Golden Delicious and Fuji apples.

The survey said workers were paid the state's minimum wage, \$9.47 an hour, but the department said it believes workers actually received \$28 a bin for Fujis and \$23 a bin for the other two varieties. ESD found no evidence WAFLA's advice distorted wages paid for picking several other varieties of apples.

The U.S. Department of Labor

uses the survey to set prevailing wages for H-2A foreign workers, which affects pay for domestic workers.

The Washington State Labor Council and Columbia Legal Services requested a probe into whether WAFLA's advice broke laws by artificially depressing wages. It's unclear whether the attorney general launched the investigation in response to that request. Efforts to reach the attorney general's office for comment were unsuccessful.

Labor Council spokesman David Groves said WAFLA's guidance undercut wages.

"We think it's an alarming manipulation of wages for farmworkers," he said. "It's not like farmworkers are overpaid."

The H-2A program has been the target of lawsuits filed by Columbia Legal Services, alleging farmers have used foreign workers to displace domestic workers.

Dan Ford, a Columbia Legal Services attorney, said the firm was focused solely on WAFLA's suggested answers to the survey when it com-

plained to the attorney general.

The firm was aware of WAFLA's advice to farmers in the fall, and ESD's analysis confirmed concerns that the suggested answers altered the survey results, he said. "The effect was to suppress workers' wages dramatically."

Groves said the Labor Council has been concerned about guest-worker programs being used to hold down wages in several fields.

"We think it's happening not only in the agriculture industry, but also engineering, high-tech," he said. "In requesting this investigation, it's not our goal to shut down the Farm Labor Association or its H-2A program. The goal is to make sure wages aren't manipulated to exploit both H-2A workers and domestic workers."

Fazio said WAFLA has hired more staff to comply with the attorney general's request for records. The investigation won't affect WAFLA's ability to supply farmers with workers, he said.

Oregon drone maker announces sales agreement with Papé Machinery

By **ERIC MORTENSON**
Capital Press

WILSONVILLE, Ore. — HoneyComb Corp., which in four years has gone from start-up tech company to marketing its agricultural drones internationally, has announced that Papé Machinery will begin selling its system in the Pacific Northwest.

The agreement puts HoneyComb's AgDrone system in 21 Papé equipment dealerships in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and California beginning Jan. 25.

Papé also carries John Deere tractors, combines and other equipment.

HoneyComb marketing director Steve Caldwell said Papé personnel will be able to train farmers in using the drone system. The AgDrone is a 5-pound, battery-powered plane with a 5-foot wingspan that can be trucked to a field and launched by hand. The delta-winged drone carries visual and infrared cameras encased in a Kevlar exoskeleton that company officials say is extremely durable.

Advocates believe drone technology could transform agriculture. Flying over fields in patterns set by the opera-



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

HoneyComb Corp. employees Steve Caldwell, left, and Ben Howard, the chief technical officer, show an AgDrone at the company's headquarters in Wilsonville, Ore. The blue tape on the wing indicates the drone has been sold to a customer in Argentina.

tors, they can spot irrigation, fertilizer or pest problems and upload the exact location to farmers. Drones also could take inventory and assess yield. Drone data can be downloaded to other equipment using programs currently available, and industry

backers believe drones eventually will communicate in real-time with other machinery.

Caldwell, the HoneyComb marketer, said farmers' adoption of precision ag technology such as auto-steer and variable rate equipment has accelerated, and drone use is

likely to follow. He said the percentage of farmers using drones — either ones they fly themselves or ones operated by agronomic service companies — could climb into double digits in 2016.

"If it blows over 20 percent it would not shock me," Caldwell said.

The complete AgDrone system sells for about \$21,000. The price includes the drone, case, spare parts and HoneyComb's data processing service.

There is concern in ag circles about "Big Data" and who controls the information collected by precision ag equipment. Caldwell said only the drone buyer will own the data and have access to it.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Yellow lines indicate the flight pattern programmed for a HoneyComb AgDrone at work on a farm in Uganda.

The company sells stepped-down versions of the AgDrone kit for about \$10,000 or \$13,000, but Caldwell said those prices don't include extras such as data processing.

What appealed to Papé was that the AgDrone was "purpose built," designed specifically for agriculture. The data it gathered could be imported directly into the management tools aboard John Deere equipment.

"It's not a toy," said Barry Peterson, Papé's integrated solutions manager.

In addition, HoneyComb's AgDrone is a fixed-wing aircraft, more stable than competing quadcopters, Peterson said. It was the only drone at a Papé field test that carried twin cameras and could provide two images of the same area. It also provided faster data processing than competitors.

"They get it," Peterson said. "That's the one thing about HoneyComb we like.

They understand how important this data is.

"There's no better tool than to have same-day information," he said. "If you have a problem, you can get on it right away."

HoneyComb was started by CEO Ryan Jenson and friends Ben Howard and John Faus, all of whom grew up in small Oregon towns. They began business in start-up space at Portland State University and two years ago moved to office, design and manufacturing space in Wilsonville, 20 miles south of Portland.

From the start, HoneyComb has positioned its drones for agricultural use, figuring farmers would be early commercial adopters of the technology.

With the Federal Aviation Administration slow to approve rules for drone use, HoneyComb has sought out buyers in Ecuador, Argentina, Uganda and other areas of Central America, South America and Africa.



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Direct seed workshop set for Idaho Falls

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

The Southern Idaho Direct Seed Workshop on Feb. 24 in Idaho Falls, will feature a grower panel on local direct seed systems and provide growers with updates on variety and fertility considerations and equipment information.

Hosted by the Idaho Wheat Commission, the workshop will run from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the Shiloh Inn Conference Center, 780 Lindsay

Blvd.

The workshop offers a great place to network with other growers and learn what has worked and what hasn't, said Idaho Wheat Commissioner Gordon Gallup, workshop organizer.

In addition to the grower panel on the basics of direct seeding, morning sessions will include cropping systems strategy with Aaron Esser, Washington State University, Adams County extension director, and resistant weeds

in no-till systems with Don Morishita, University of Idaho weed scientist and director of the Kimberly Research and Extension Center.

Afternoon sessions will focus on: disease control in no-till systems with Juliet Marshall, University of Idaho cereal pathologist; a panel on crop rotation in no-till systems, including Marlon Winger, Natural Resources Conservation Service agronomist; and water in no-till systems with Howard Neibling, University of Idaho water management engineer.

Lunch is provided, and sponsors will be on hand to share information.


For more information, contact the Idaho Wheat Commission at (208) 334-2353.

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