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# Opinion

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## OUR VIEW

# Higher minimum wages would hurt rural West

A busload of Eastern Oregon farmers and business owners recently rode 400 miles across the state to the Capitol in Salem to plead with the Legislature not to cripple their businesses.

Lawmakers have been debating proposals to raise the minimum wage in Oregon. As is the case in several other states, pressure is being put on them to raise the minimum wage. In the West, initiatives are planned in several states to vote on increasing the minimum wage.

The delegation from Malheur County in Eastern Oregon

reminded lawmakers that a wage that may be realistic in a high cost-of-living area such as Portland is way out of line in Eastern Oregon — and anywhere else in the rural West.

The cost of living in most rural areas is a fraction of that in urban areas. For example, the average cost of a house in Portland is about \$271,000. The average cost of a house in Eastern Oregon is about \$105,000.

Housing is the major influence on the cost of living.

Legislators were also told that in Idaho, which is adjacent

to Eastern Oregon, the minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour. Oregon businesses are already at a disadvantage because their state's minimum wage is \$2 higher than Idaho's.

If Oregon's minimum wage was increased and businesses were forced to pay a minimum wage nearly double Idaho's wage, businesses would be put squarely between an economic rock and a hard place.

One of those who testified at the Capitol was Owyhee Produce General Manager Shay Myers. He said that if Oregon increases its minimum wage,

it will force his onion packing facility to automate or move to Idaho. Either option would kill Oregon jobs, he said.

Myers told the legislators that increasing Oregon's minimum wage to \$13.50 would increase Owyhee Produce's overall costs by 10 percent, while the company's profit margin is only 8 percent.

You do the math.

Artificially increasing the cost of doing business in Oregon — or Washington or any other state — will hurt rural businesses. Those who are pushing a \$13.50 or \$15 an

hour minimum wage lose sight of how economics work. That extra money will come out of the bottom lines of businesses across the state. In many cases, that bottom line would disappear.

Those seeking higher minimum wages statewide want to use other people's money to make political points with their supporters.

But by the time they are done, the result will be fewer jobs, fewer businesses and a weaker rural economy.

That's a result legislators must avoid.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

## OUR VIEW

# Land management issues remain

Federal and state officials effectively altered the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Tuesday, arresting eight protesters and killing a ninth in a shootout.

The protesters had demanded that two Harney County ranchers serving five-year sentences for burning federal land be released, and that federal public lands be turned over to the state, the county and to private ownership. It was a futile endeavor from the start that lacked any legal basis.

For better or worse, the occupation did draw some national attention to legitimate issues concerning the U.S. government's management of its vast holding of public lands.

Now what?

It will be all too easy for many casual observers East of the Rockies, and even a good many in the liberal urban centers of the West, to dismiss all of this as the machinations of a half-cocked collection of religious zealots, disenfranchised Reubens and anti-government nuts with too many guns and a crazy interpretation of the Constitution.

Unfortunately, that would miss the real underlying issues.

The standoff is diminished, but the anger and frustration of many farmers, ranchers and lumbermen in Harney County and throughout the West remains unchanged. Their interests must now be pressed in the court of public opinion, and non-Westerners made to understand the real issues.

The federal government holds more than half the land in the West. The economic and civic fabric of rural communities depends on trees cut from the forest, livestock grazed on the range and minerals gleaned from the mining claims.

The government once encouraged these activities in the service of the country's growing population and in fulfillment of its manifest destiny. Now, policies have changed and that same government seems to be draining the lifeblood of the rural West.

Many in the rural West don't think their government listens to them and that their concerns are given short shrift. They believe that their livelihoods, their very way of life, are in the hands of bureaucrats

controlled by interests outside their communities.

They don't understand how the government can claim to be a good steward while it lets its forests fill with fuel that feeds ever more terrible wildfires that destroy the very habitat it seeks to protect. They bristle at what they perceive to be the mismanagement of these fires that causes their own property to be damaged or destroyed.

They are stymied at every turn by the inertia that attends every decision, every necessary action on a grazing allotment or timber harvest. They are tired of the endless environmental litigation that seems bent on driving even the most conservation-minded producers off public lands.

They watch as their government adds to its empire, using taxpayer money to outbid local buyers and take more land off the tax roles, and erode private economic opportunities.

They want to be good stewards, to do the right thing. But they want a fair shake.

Now is the time to tell these stories, to tell America that rural western lives matter.

# Foreign worker visas in need of revision

By KATIE HEGER  
For the Capital Press

Guest  
comment  
Katie Heger

People are needed to keep a farm running. From repair tasks to driving machinery and checking crops — there's no shortage of work to be done.

Seems simple, right? But farm work is real labor. It's not easy. The job doesn't include an ergonomic chair, cubicle, scheduled vacation or sick days. Farm work requires long days in often undesirable weather conditions and comes with an unpredictable schedule. It requires ongoing training, knowledge of crops and how they grow, plus many hours of twisting, turning, bending, climbing, shoveling and heavy lifting. There's no way around it: It is labor and most Americans do not want to do it.

Our farm has run into a worker shortage for the past 13 years. We advertise in local papers and spread the word through our neighbors. We have offered bonuses and additional benefits, but get minimal response. We have been unable to hire any of the people who respond, and we are left each year looking to hire qualified foreign seasonal labor through the H-2A ag worker visa program and the H-2B visa program.

When I reflect on the process, all I can say is that it is cumbersome, untimely, expensive, uncertain, and ultimately lacks an understanding of agriculture and our labor needs. Over the years, the amount of personal, business and farm production information we have to present to prove our need for labor increases. But the speed of getting visas cleared does not. The time frame for approval and having an employee arrive and ready to work has become unmanageable and costly.

We start the application process months in advance, adhere to dates and guidelines requested and then wait for someone at the Department of Labor — with little to no knowledge of farming in my region — to approve, deny or delay a request. We have had employees arrive anywhere

from three days to one month after the date we needed them. This simply doesn't work. We cannot run a business without people to help get the work done. When our employees arrive significantly late, our time frame for training to ensure safety procedures are followed is condensed, and our ability to get a crop planted and cared for is hindered.

The H-2A worker program has faults. For example, the workers are only able to work for nine months. This presents a problem for us since we farm year-round: preparing soil, planting, caring for the crops, harvesting and hauling our crop to point of sale. Another issue with the program is that we are not guaranteed to be approved for hiring year after year, and even if we are approved, we do not know if we will be able to hire the same employees back.

This causes a lot of stress and uncertainty. We can't afford to not know who will be on our workforce. Initial training, orientation and licensing take a lot of time. Time we can't afford to take away from running our business.

A revised ag worker visa program is desperately needed and needs to include options for year-round employment, renewability of employment, and should account for reasonable wages, manageable expenses and additional benefits like housing, transportation and meals. Foreign labor is not just a need for select states or specific sectors of farming; it is a need for all. I begin my farm's journey into 2016 hopeful that change will be made and that we will be able to hire a dependable, willing workforce.

Katie Heger, an advocate for agriculture, blogs at hegerfamilyfarms.wordpress.com. She and her husband farm in central North Dakota. Her column appears courtesy of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

## Readers' views

### Why are feds making example of Hammonds?

Isn't it wonderful that we live in Oregon where we can kill an innocent unborn baby and give a person all the tools they need to help them end their own life, but if we burn up a sagebrush we will be hit with a stiff jail sentence. Our federal judges call it domestic terrorism to burn sagebrush on federal land, except when the government does it.

I'm a 79-year-old rancher and I've been trying to get rid of sagebrush

### Letters policy

**Write to us:** Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

**Letters policy:** Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.

all my life by every method imaginable, including fire, and if sometimes I was successful, the grass and forage came back so much better.

How many times have we watched the federal firefighters run the locals off of a small fire that they had under control and they do backfires and with their

inaction, generate it into a fire that would burn for weeks.

How many times did their backfires burn up private ground and livestock?

So why is the federal government so insistent on making an example out of the Hammond family? They did their time and are paying the price.

Why are they so dogged and relentless in spending so much time and money in trying to continue to persecute one family? Could it have anything to do with a water right case the Feds lost to the Hammonds a few years back, and they are trying to get revenge? Could it be the

Feds covet the Hammonds' property next door to the refuge and on Steens Mountain?

The government has deep pockets when they go after private citizens and it makes one wonder why they want to extend their authority so hard on one single family.

I've known the Hammond family since they moved to Frenchglen and Diamond about 50 years ago, and they are good, honest people and certainly not terrorists. We need to ask ourselves why the federal government is releasing thousands of convicted felons and are so relentless in trying to send

one of our hard-working, tax-paying neighbors to jail, especially after they have already served their time.

Why aren't our congressmen looking into this travesty of the government taking away their BLM permits and trying to steal their property?

I'm wondering how you would feel, whether government worker or private citizen, to be hung twice for the same crime, to justify the federal government stealing your property.

Help me make some sense of all this.

Jerry Miller  
Crane, Ore.