

# GROUNDWATER CRISIS

## Its burdens and its opportunities

# WAFLA deals with H-2A slowdown, AG probe

By DAN WHEAT  
Capital Press

ELLENSBURG, Wash. — A state attorney general's investigation of WAFLA advising growers on a wage survey will not impede the association's ability to provide H-2A-visa foreign guest-workers to growers this year, but the U.S. Department of Labor might.

That's what Dan Fazio, WAFLA director, said at the organization's annual labor conference at Central Washington University in Ellensburg on Feb. 18.

DOL is supposed to act on H-2A applications no fewer than 30 days prior to the date the workers are needed but that is slipping to 15 days or less, guaranteeing workers will be late, Fazio said.

A half-dozen applications for a total of about 1,000 workers, mainly for Washington tree fruit growers, are late so far this season and there's "every indication it will continue," Fazio said. DOL blames it on technical problems and lack of staff, he said.

Delays could play havoc with the timely arrival of some 15,000 workers from Mexico on H-2A visas this season to prune trees, thin crops and pick fruit in Washington.

WAFLA, formerly known as the Washington Farm Labor Association, is working with DOL and members of Congress to address the problem. DOL announced delays in late January. WAFLA began experiencing them in early February, Fazio said.

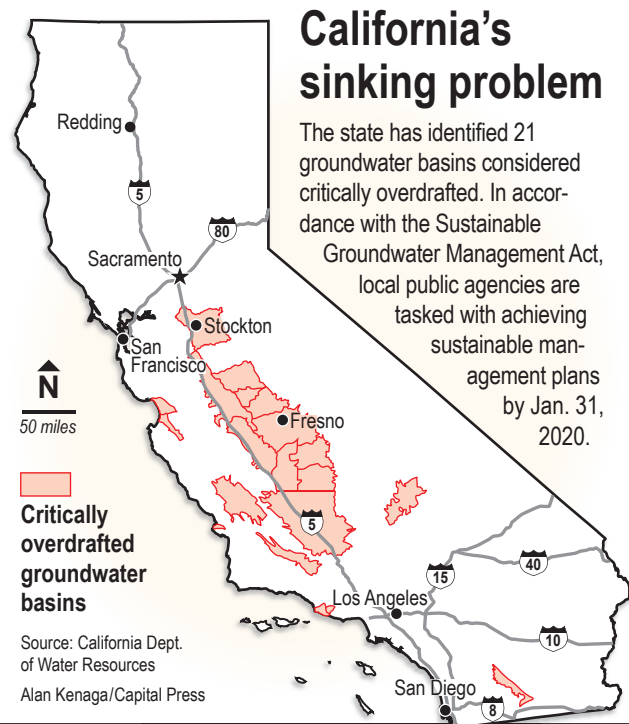
Because of the delays, growers should make sure their applications specify the earliest possible date of need and that they are filed 75 days prior to that date, Fazio said.

Last season, 433 workers lost a combined 2,593 days of work due to visa printing problems at the border that began in May and peaked in June, according to WAFLA's 2015 annual report.

The Obama administration has been "very hostile" to the H-2A program, Craig Regellbrugge, senior vice president of AmericanHort in Washington, D.C., said at the Washington Growers League annual meeting in Yakima, Jan. 26.

Also at WAFLA's Feb. 18 meeting, a letter from Fazio to members was distributed emphasizing the Washington attorney general's civil investigation into WAFLA advising

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By TIM HEARDEN  
Capital Press

While some growers may see the emerging new state groundwater regulations as a potential burden, Helm, Calif., farmer Don Cameron sees them as an opportunity.

Few growers understand California's groundwater crisis better than Cameron, who farms almonds, walnuts and about two dozen other crops on 7,000 acres on the north fork of the Kings River in the San Joaquin Valley.

Cameron's Terranova Ranch isn't in an irrigation district, so he relies entirely on groundwater pumping. In 2011, he used a federal conservation grant to start using flood water from the river to replenish the aquifer beneath his sandy property, and he hopes to someday flood as many as 16,000 acres during wet winters to recharge the groundwater supply.

With the drought-related escalation of pumping throughout the valley causing land to sink at a historic rate, Cameron is concerned about the future availability of the resource.

However, he believes the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act — a package of laws enacted in 2014 to give local agencies sweeping new controls over groundwater use — will create momentum for more projects like his.

"We're looking long-term," Cameron said. "Before the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act passed, this was our goal — to try and rebuild sustainable groundwater in our region. Now with SGMA, it's even more in the forefront. It can actually solve a lot of the issues we have with groundwater pumping."

### A precious resource

Groundwater is the lifeblood of California agriculture. In the almond industry alone, nearly 70 percent of farms normally rely on at least some groundwater for irrigation, according to a 2014 survey by government agencies and the Almond Board of California.

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Helm, Calif., almond grower Don Cameron.

Courtesy of Almond Board of California



Courtesy of Calif. Dept. of Water Resources

One of three new wells is being tested west of Bakersfield, Calif., in October as part of the Kern Water Bank Recharge and Recovery Enhancement Project. The groundwater at this well site will discharge into a connected underground pipeline, which pumps into the Kern Water Bank canal.

# Ag: Oregon wage hike will have big impact

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

Ag interests say the three-tiered plan to hike the state's minimum wage passed by the Legislature is better than some alternatives, but still will have a big impact on growers and processors.

Under the plan awaiting

Gov. Kate Brown's signature, in July Oregon's minimum wage will jump from \$9.25 to \$9.75 statewide.

It will gradually climb to \$14.75 in 2022 in the Portland urban growth boundary, which includes parts of Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties. It will rise to \$13.50 in Benton, Clat-

sop, Columbia, Deschutes, Hood River, Jackson, Josephine, Lane, Lincoln, Linn, Marion, Polk, Tillamook, Wasco and Yamhill counties, and parts of Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties outside Portland's urban growth boundary.

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Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Farmers, onion processors and small business owners from Malheur County oppose increases to Oregon's minimum wage Jan. 14.



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