Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Washington Rep. Joel Kretz, far left, talks with, from left, Okanogan County Commissioners Jim DeTro and Ray Campbell, and Carlos Gutierrez, a prescribed burn manager from Florida, on March 3 in Olympia after a House committee work session on using fire to reduce the risk of uncontrolled wildfires. Kretz has introduced a bill calling for more prescribed burns in Washington.

Air law, expense clouds Washington's path to controlled burns

Legislature embraces pilot project plan

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Lawmakers appear willing to light more controlled burns, though budget and environmental considerations stand in the way of significantly increasing the number of acres seared of flame-feeding undergrowth.

"We've got a long ways to go," said Okanogan County Rep. Joel Kretz, whose Eastern Washington district has been ravaged by wildfires for two straight summers.

"I think one of the biggest things here is educating the public that 'no fire' is not an option. No smoke is not an option. It's better to have a little in the spring and fall, instead of continual summer-long smoke," he said.

Washington's million-acre wildfire season last summer nearly tripled the acres burned in 2014, which had been a record. Wildfires were the second-largest source of air pollution in the state in 2015, after transportation. The fires cost the state $164 million in unanticipated suppression costs. In response, lawmakers likely will pass one or more bills this session related to suppressing and preventing wildfires.

Kretz has proposed reviving controlled burns, a forest-thinning practice that went into decline after the Legislature passed the Washington Clean Air Act in 1991.

Kretz-sponsored legislation, House Bill 2928, has passed both chambers unanimously, though in slightly different versions that must be reconciled.

The bill depends on an $800,000 appropriation to slightly increase controlled burning by the state, perhaps by 1,000 acres this year.

Kretz said he hopes controlled burns in 2016 will demonstrate to the 2017 Legislature that they can be done safely and with less smoke than released by raging wildfires.

"We've got to get a successful track record," he said. "We've got to figure out what the roadblocks are."

Officials estimate 2.7 million acres of forestland in Eastern Washington should be thinned to make trees less vulnerable to pests, diseases and catastrophic wildfires. Annually, only about 145,000 acres are thinned, mostly by mechanical methods.

"145,000 acres a year against a 2.7 million-acre problem. It's going to take us a long time to fix it, if we keep going at that rate," State Forester Aaron Everett told the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee on Thursday. "If this is a race with mother nature, we're getting lapped."

DNR, which manages 5.6 million acres statewide, has virtually stopped prescribed burns.

"When the state Clean Air Act was passed and the department was directed to find a way to reduce emissions, that's what we did. So there isn't a lot of burning that's happening on state trust lands," Everett said. "It's almost entirely mechanical work."

According to DNR, the state could double its prescribed burns and not violate an emissions limit set by the Clean Air Act.

Even that wouldn't be enough controlled burning to make a difference, Kretz said.

"We need to be doing more than double what we're doing, like a hundred times (more), so I'm thinking that's probably the barrier," he said. "That's got to be dealt with."

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife manages 1 million acres. About 100,000 acres are "in overstocked, unnatural fuel condition," WDFW Lands Division Manager Clay Sprague said.

WDFW has burned about 1,200 acres annually since 2011. Increasing burning to 10,000 acres a year would cost between $6 million and $7 million a year, the department estimates.

Sprague said the expense will be in equipment and training burn managers. Some money could be recouped by logging commercial timber before setting the fire, he said.

Reps. Newhouse, Reichert introduce Yakima Basin bill

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

A bill authorizing the first 10-year phase of a 30-year plan to improve the Yakima Basin water supply has been introduced in the U.S. House by Reps. Dan Newhouse and Dave Reichert, Washington state Republicans.

HR 4686, introduced March 3, is a companion bill to S 1694, which passed the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee last November and is awaiting full Senate action.

"Implementing this plan will give agricultural producers the confidence they need to continue operating and expanding in the area while respecting concerns of conservationists and local residents," Reichert said.

Newhouse said the Yakima River Basin Integrated Water Resource Management Plan is becoming a national model in collaborative water infrastructure planning.

The bills would begin the first 10 years of development of the basin plan. The plan seeks to better accommodate water needs of farmers, conservationists and residents through water conservation and ecosystem restoration, additional water storage and construction of fish passages at Cle Elum and Rimrock reservoirs.

Lake Kachess water storage would be improved and decisions will be made on expanding the capacity of Bumping Lake and building a new Wymer reservoir between Ellensburg and Selah, said Urban Eberhart, an Ellensburg farmer who is manager of the Kittitas Reclamation District and a member of the plan's implementation committee.

Construction will start on either Bumping or Wymer in the second 10 years of development and on the other one in the third 10-year period, he said.

The committee is pleased with the legislative progress, Eberhart said.

Growers turn to owls for vole control

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

CALDWELL, Idaho — Brad McIntyre hit a stumbling block two years ago in his efforts to improve farm production by mimicking nature — vole populations spiked, and the rodents began decimating his crops.

Practices such as removing tillage, leaving standing residue and planting multi-species cover crops for soil-health benefits may have increased his soil organic matter, but they also provided cover for an abundance of voles, while leaving their tunnels relatively undisturbed.

Once again, McIntyre turned to nature for the solution to his agronomic challenge, working with Canyon County last April to erect an owl house for every 40 acres of his farmland.

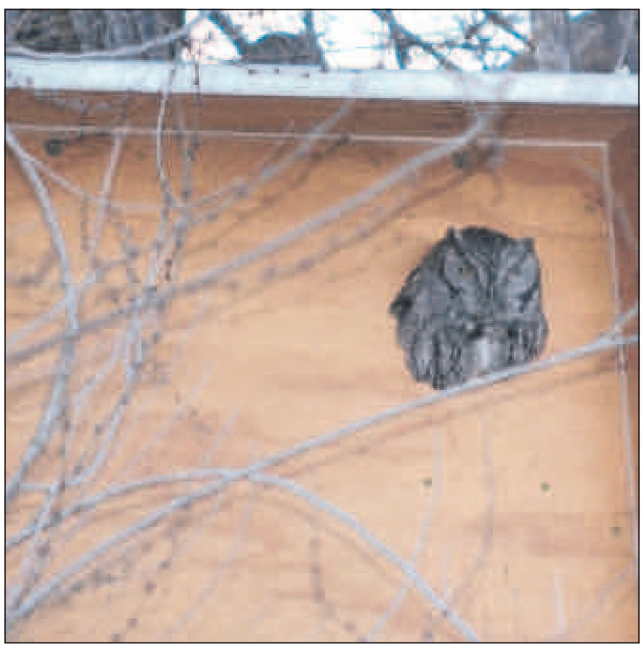

Photo submitted

A screech owl emerges from his box. Officials with Canyon County Weed and Pest Control have a program in which they set up owl boxes at a discounted cost to help control gophers, but farmers have been ordering the boxes lately for vole control.

McIntyre believes owls have provided a cheap, effective and natural alternative to using poison for vole control. Other farmers in his region have also sought rodent-control help from Canyon County, which offers to build and erect discounted owl boxes for landowners under its long-standing gopher abatement district.

Long ago, McIntyre said, his family removed every tree and fence to maximize its farmable land. Now, he plans to replant rows of trees, hoping to provide additional places for his winged predators to perch.

"We're trying to not only in our soil mimic what nature is doing, but we're trying to do that with predators, as well," McIntyre said, adding short durations of high-density grazing of cover crops have also helped to trample vole tunnels.

Canyon County charges $159 per owl box. Boxes are mounted atop a 15-foot-tall pole.

McIntyre admits owls don't provide a "one-year, instant fix," but he's seen owl droppings along his irrigation lines, and he's convinced his vole pressure has dropped.

"I think it will easily pay for itself," he said.

Grower Ray Gross added owl boxes last winter and may also erect them to control pests on a Nampa golf course of which he's part owner.

"I'm not saying it's a fix-all, but I'll bet it's going to help some of the problems," Gross said.

Richard Friddle, lead applicator with Canyon County Weed & Pest Control, said owls also control gophers, which can damage irrigation ditches and country roads. Friddle said the county has noticed a decline in payments of the $1 bounty it pays on gopher tails.

"This vole thing has been a real unexpected bonus," Friddle said.

When Canyon County started the owl box program in the winter of 2011, Friddle admits "everybody thought it was a funny joke." Now, word has spread that a nesting pair of barn owls eats an average of 35 voles per night. Friddle also erects boxes in surrounding counties such as Gem, Payette, Owyhee, Ada, and even Malheur County, Ore.

Owl house occupancy rates have been above 50 percent, despite owl deaths to West Nile virus.

Friddle, who has installed 30 owl boxes this winter, said the program is growing increasingly popular among farmers, and one grower who put up eight boxes reported having no vole issues, though they wreaked havoc in neighbors' fields.

Marlon Winger, the state agronomist for Idaho's USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, has also taken notice of Canyon County's owl box program.

"You've got to take a step back and say, 'What is Mother Nature doing? Is she spraying vole bait on the ground?'" Winger asked.

Farm Bureau: TPP offers significant benefits

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The American Farm Bureau Federation is bringing numbers to the table in support of congressional ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multi-lateral trade agreement between the U.S. and 11 other countries.

Farm Bureau's economic analysis of TPP shows the agreement has the potential to increase U.S. exports by $5.3 billion annually and boost annual net farm income by $4.4 billion when fully implemented – expected in 2026.

The agreement, concluded in October, would raise total U.S. ag cash receipts nearly $8.5 billion annually, according to Farm Bureau's analysis.

Livestock cash receipts would increase $5.8 billion annually, it says, and cash receipts for the crop sector — including fruits, vegetable and nuts — would increase $2.7 billion.

U.S. net trade is expected to increase for beef, pork, poultry, butter, cheese, nonfat dry milk, rice, cotton, soybeans and soybean products.

Net trade of corn and wheat are expected to decline slightly, but overall use and cash receipts are expected to increase as higher feed use will be needed to feed livestock for increased exports of beef and pork.

TPP effects, full implementation

(Annually, millions of dollars)

State	Additional net farm income	Additional ag exports	Additional jobs
California	$1,170	$924.8	7,000
Washington	246.3	179.8	1,350
Idaho	174.9	112.8	850
Oregon	163.2	105.5	800
U.S.	4,400	5,300	40,100

Source: American Farm Bureau Federation — Capital Press graphic

The agreement would also result in more than 40,000 new U.S. jobs, according to the analysis.

Farm Bureau personnel were not available for comment this week, but Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall extolled the benefits of TPP and warned of the consequences of not approving the agreement in a press release accompanying the economic analysis.

"Clearly, America's farmers and ranchers have much to gain from approval of TPP…. American agriculture is a growth industry and to continue that trend, we must expand our market opportunities," he said.

The agreement would reduce ag tariffs, adjust tariff-rate quotas and reduce non-tariff barriers to provide better access to markets.

Legally, the agreement only goes into full effect if the U.S. ratifies it, but all the other member countries are already implementing bilateral provisions of the deal without waiting for the U.S., Farm Bureau reported.

"Every day we delay means lost markets as other TPP counties implement the deal's advantages with each other. We are already arriving at the party late because right now expanded trade due to TPP is going on across the Pacific Rim," Duvall said.