

Upstream

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the impaired waters listing program and those related to the public opinion research.”

Wasserman declined to comment.

The newly available records, released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by the Capital Press, reveal more details about EPA's part in an advocacy campaign that some federal lawmakers have called an illegal lobbying effort that falsely portrayed farmers as unregulated polluters.

EPA grants totaling some \$655,000 over five years were passed from the fisheries commission to the tribe to support What's Upstream.

EPA ended its support in April after the complaints

from lawmakers. The EPA's Office of Inspector General is auditing how the money was used.

EPA Pacific Northwest Regional Administrator Dennis McLerran has described the agency's role in What's Upstream as “technical input.” An EPA spokesman confirmed this week that McLerran was referring to the agency's detailed review of the What's Upstream website.

An email from Chang to the fisheries commission last spring shows the EPA was concerned that what was intended to be a broad effort to educate the public about preventing Puget Sound pollution had turned into a media and political campaign to regulate farmers.

Later, the EPA questioned how the website presented the results of two public opinion



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

A What's Upstream billboard in Olympia advertises a website that advocates for more strict regulations on farmers. The Environmental Protection Agency went over the What's Upstream website line-by-line last year, trying with mixed success to tone down the site's attacks on agriculture, according to newly released EPA records.

surveys conducted by Strategies 360, a Seattle lobbying firm hired by the tribe to develop the advocacy campaign.

The surveys, linked to on the website, found that the public generally held farmers in high regard and that most

respondents were satisfied with water quality.

The website's summary of the surveys stressed responses that indicated high concern about agriculture's impact on water and strong support for mandatory 100-foot buffers

between farm fields and waterways.

“There will be many questions about the public opinion research. Intelligent consumers of the information on this website will need a basis for concluding that these claims are credible,” Chang wrote in an October email.

The EPA did not comment on the images that What's Upstream used to link agriculture with water pollution. The images included photos of cows standing in streams. The photos were not taken in Washington.

Strategies 360 Vice President of Communications Jeff Reading said the photos were “tools in an information campaign.”

“I don't know that the images one uses has to be somehow geographically associated with the issue in question,” he said.

In February, a month before the website drew widespread attention from lawmakers, the EPA again urged What's Upstream to subject its materials to an independent review.

“As we have said in previous comments, the deliverables produced under this project do need technical review,” the EPA commented in a review of plans by What's Upstream to advertise in newspapers and on radio and billboards. “The products generated under this award are highly visible and are intended to influence public opinion.”

What's Upstream did remove from the website claims about agriculture's contribution to water pollution that EPA reviewers said were unsupported by current data.

Eagles

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Three ranchers in the Willamette Valley acknowledged having serious problems with eagles but did not want to talk on the record or give their names.

Because ranchers don't report the depredation, representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Farm Service Agency and USDA Wildlife Services say they are unaware that eagles killing lambs are a widespread problem.

Lack of reporting

Emily Ruckert, a sheep rancher in Tangent, Ore., said most producers don't know how to report eagle depredation or that services or resources exist and don't have time to go through the reporting process so they choose to handle it themselves.

“I've been dealing with eagles my whole life,” Ruckert said. “I've never even heard of reporting to Fish and Wildlife. There's really nothing we can do.”

Statistics are equally hard to find. A USDA survey found that eagles killed 6,300 sheep and lambs in 2004, the last year those statistics were reported separately. The department stopped reporting specifically on eagle depredation after that but in 2009 reported that predators killed 247,200 sheep and lambs.

Dave Williams, Oregon state director of USDA Wildlife Services, said ranchers reported only three cases of eagle depredation on lambs to his agency between 2011 and 2015.

Representatives at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said the agency has received no reports of eagle depredation in recent years.

According to the agency, “depredation” is damage to property or a threat to human health and safety caused by eagles.

Eagles are protected by the Bald and Golden Eagle Act and the Migratory Bird Act, which means ranchers are not allowed to scare, harass or take eagles preying on their livestock without obtaining a permit from the USFWS.

In addition to being the national bird, bald eagles were protected under the Endangered Species Act until 2007.

Williams said eagles are doing well now and are not endangered but are still protected.

Rodger Ruckert, who is Emily Ruckert's father and partner in her sheep operation, said he has seen the number of eagles killing lambs drastically increase as their population has grown.

“When I was a kid, if you saw one eagle it was quite a sight. Now there's easily 15 to 20 eagles around the pastures



Janae Sargent/Capital Press

Issaiah Wahl tags lambs at Wahl Grazing. He said the farm is targeted more by bald eagles but that both golden and bald eagles attack their lambs.



Courtesy of Kathy Munsel, ODFW

A captive American Bald Eagle is shown. The bald eagle breeds in 32 of 36 Oregon counties and is found throughout the state.

on any given day,” Ruckert said.

Ruckert said most eagles don't migrate anymore and that he has several native immature eagles that eat his lamb crop all summer long.

Ruckert said he has lost 10 percent of his flock of 300 lambs to eagle depredation, which is a devastating loss to him and his family.

“These producers basically have to watch their livestock getting eaten and they have to pay the bill,” said Carter Wilford, a licensed falconer and ranching advocate from Utah.

Wahl explained that she has seen eagles grab small lambs and drop them from heights to kill them and has seen eagles pecking at the heads of larger lambs until they die.

Emily Ruckert said she came out to her field one day and saw two eagles on a month-old lamb pecking its brains out while it was still alive.

The USFWS offers permits and resources for ranchers experiencing eagle depredation but Jason Holm, the assistant regional director of external affairs, said the agency has not received any applications for an eagle depredation permit for agricultural loss in recent memory.

Because eagles are protected by federal laws, ranchers need permits to disturb bald or golden eagles that attack their livestock.

Hazing permits

Federal law prohibits

wounding or killing eagles so the permits allow only hazing eagles, which means using nonlethal means to scare them away from livestock.

Wilford said accessing resources is bureaucratic and complicated and ranchers are frustrated by the federal government when it comes to eagle depredation.

To apply for a permit to haze eagles, ranchers need to have someone from USDA Wildlife Services inspect the lamb carcass and declare that the animal was killed because of depredation.

After a depredation is declared, Wilford said it is still up to the discretion of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service whether to grant a rancher a permit to haze the eagles.

Williams said investigators examine the carcasses to look for talon marks and determine if the animal was killed by an eagle or died of other causes and was fed on by an eagle after its death.

Wilford said having a USDA Wildlife Services investigation done can take up to two weeks, which causes further problems for ranchers.

Between the time a report is made and when an investigator arrives to examine the carcass, it is vulnerable to being eaten by other predators and draws other eagles and predators to the pasture looking for more lambs to kill.

Holm said the Fish and Wildlife Service takes approximately 30 to 90 days to process completed permit applications once the investigation is done and the depredation order is declared.

Williams, of USDA Wildlife Services, agreed it can be a problem for ranchers and suggested tarping carcasses to protect them from other animals.

They also recommended taking photos of the carcass and keeping as much evidence as possible for the application.

Wahl said asking her to photograph a carcass or protect it is unrealistic because she runs 6,000 sheep on 15 pastures and 3,000 acres and

can't keep track of each incident.

An eagle depredation permit application requires a \$100 fee in addition to documentation and a depredation order from the USDA Wildlife Services.

Wilford said he thinks ranchers don't submit reports or eagle permit applications because the process is so difficult.

“Most ranchers either have given up on the issue, don't have hope or don't know any help exists,” Wilford said.

Permit experience

Larry Ruckert, Emily Ruckert's uncle and owner of a separate small sheep operation, obtained an eagle depredation permit 15 years ago after seeing a large golden eagle kill a 20-pound lamb.

Ruckert said he had to call five different people to figure out how to apply for a permit. It allowed him to use fire-cracker shells to scare eagles away.

He said it gave him temporary relief but when he applied for a permit the next year, he never got a response and gave up.

Federal law and USFWS regulations once allowed licensed falconers to trap immature golden eagles attacking livestock but the agency stopped the practice in 2009, said Sterling Brown, vice president of public policy for the Utah Farm Bureau Federation.

“The (USFWS) does not believe livestock losses are significant and has ceased falconers' access to eagles,” Brown said.

Holm said it is up to state governors to issue depredation orders and allow falconers to come into an area to trap predatory golden eagles and keep them for the sport of falconry. In his time at the Fish and Wildlife Service, Holm said he has only seen depredation orders used in Wyoming.

Holm said ranchers should first contact USDA Wildlife Services to assess if livestock damage was caused by eagles.



Courtesy of Laura Wahl

To combat eagle depredation in the pastures, Laura Wahl brings young lambs to an indoor lambing facility for the first five days after they are born. The space is too small to hold a large number of lambs so she runs them outdoors once they are big enough to be less vulnerable to eagles.

Compensation available

There is also a compensation program that was built into the 2014 Farm Bill that authorizes payments of up to 75 percent of the market value of livestock lost to federally protected animals for up to \$125,000, but few ranchers are aware of it.

Taylor Murray, outreach specialist for the Oregon Farm Service Agency, said his office has never had an application for compensation for eagle depredation on lambs. He said that the Farm Service Livestock Disaster specialist has never heard of eagle depredation in Oregon.

Ranchers must apply at their local Farm Service Agency office and submit a “Notice of Loss” form within 30 days of the loss.

Wahl said she had never heard of a compensation program but will apply now that she knows.

Wilford stressed that he believes in protecting eagles but that there is now enough eagle protection to warrant giving falconers access to predatory golden eagles and finding other resources for ranchers.

Falconers cannot trap bald eagles.

He said the system for obtaining permits and compensation needs to be simplified and that the USFWS needs to look at how to prevent depredation rather than dealing with it after it happens.

Preventive measures

Ranchers have found some preventive measures to be helpful.

Wahl said the biggest help for her operation is to lamb in a barn while the lambs are smallest and most vulnerable.

When a lamb is born in a pasture at Wahl Grazing, employees immediately transport it into a large barn, where it is protected from eagles.

But because of space constrictions, Wahl said she has to turn out the lambs after five days.

Wahl also has guard dogs but said they don't do much to protect lambs from eagles.

Emily Ruckert said she has protection llamas to deal with other predators but that she hasn't found them to be helpful against eagles. She also does lambing indoors when possible and stays with the lambs whenever they are outside.

Williams said the biggest thing that draws eagles to a pasture is carcasses. He said an eagle will first be drawn to a field to feed off a dead lamb and may then associate the field with easy food.

He suggested being vigilant in cleaning up and disposing of carcasses before eagles have a chance to associate lambs with food.

Wilford stressed the importance of ranchers reporting eagle depredation — even if they don't receive a permit or compensation.

“It would be so helpful if people reported more,” said Wilford. “It would help to validate that there is a problem. The service is saying they don't get reports of depredation so they can't do anything.”

Brown agreed that ranchers aren't reporting in any of the Western states but that the Utah Farm Bureau and its Western counterparts want to do more and assist ranchers.

“We want to protect eagles, migratory birds and predators but there also needs to be a program in place that is efficient enough to allow livestock producers to receive help when livestock is being depredated on,” Brown said. “Ranchers aren't looking for handouts, just fair compensation for their losses.”

Prices

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values following several years of “sky-high” commodity prices. Especially in the Corn Belt, where the report shows land values have dropped by 1.9 percent on average, Eborn said buyers had been paying more than they could generate from their land.

“I'd say the bubble is getting ready to burst and the land values will probably go down for several years. That's just my gut,” Eborn said.

Eborn still receives phone calls from retirement funds and investment firms inquiring about the economics of Idaho farms, which offer diverse crop rotations and didn't inflate in value as rapidly as Midwestern land. Many investors have been leasing the land back to the growers who formerly owned it, Eborn said.

Doug Robison, senior vice president for Western Idaho with Northwest Farm Credit Services, said his employer's internal data confirms Idaho land values have continued to strengthen, likely because the state

remains appealing to investors who still can't find a better alternative to farm land.

“We're also seeing a decrease in the number of transactions on the marketplace, so supply remains extremely tight,” Robison said, adding tight land supply has also held up agricultural land values in “other parts of the Northwest.”

Robison anticipates land values in Idaho's core growing areas will remain strong in the near term, while marginal land will be the first to decline in value.

Rexburg potato farmer Lynn Wilcox has continued to see lofty sale prices of farms in his area. Nonetheless, he succeeded in lowering many of his rental agreements this season and intends to renegotiate the remainder of his agreements next season.

“There's no way you can farm as much out of the land as people are asking for it,” Wilcox said. “Outside of insurance companies and investment groups, nobody has got money now.”

McCammon rancher Jim Guthrie

blames “outside interests” for paying more than land is worth and skewing the market. Guthrie said pasture land in his area sells immediately, and he's had to cut back on his herd, unable to buy or lease grazing ground.

“I would expect prices to keep going up, but it's not reflective of what producers can afford to pay,” Guthrie said.

Oakley grower Randy Hardy believes competition with dairies that “gobble up land” to support their herds has also kept Idaho land values high.