

Minimum wage, sick leave hit Wash. employers

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Passage of Initiative 1433 by Washington voters, boosting the state's minimum wage, is another "straw that can break an employer's back," says Dan Fazio, director of WAFLA, formerly the Washington Farm Labor Association.

Washington's minimum wage is \$9.47 per hour but with passage of I-1433 it goes up to \$11 on Jan. 1, 2017, \$11.50 on Jan. 1, 2018, \$12 on Jan. 1, 2019, \$13.50 on Jan. 1, 2020 and returns to being calculated on a consumer price index in 2021.

"The minimum wage is one of a number of new regulations that are making it harder for people to do business," Fazio said.

Employers also are struggling with a new federal wage rule under the Fair Labor Standards Act regarding hourly versus salaried workers that's tied up in litigation, he said.

The new state minimum wage hurts workers in that it causes small employers who can't afford to pay more to lay off workers, he said.

"If an employer keeps nine employees but lays off one,

the nine make more but the one makes nothing," he said. "That's already happened in areas of big minimum wage increases."

I-1433 not only raises the minimum wage but for the first time requires all employers to provide sick leave for full-time and seasonal employees.

Sick leave accrues at one hour for every 40 hours worked beginning on the first day of employment. A full-time employee working 40 hours per week would accrue 6.5 days per year.

Seasonal workers who leave an employer but then return within 12 months are entitled to continue accruing sick leave where they left off. "I think that's unfair. It's tough for the employer to keep track of all of this. Sick leave shouldn't accrue if the employee is gone for more than 90 days," Fazio said.

The initiative also states that for each hour of paid sick leave used, an employee shall be paid the greater of the minimum hourly wage rate or his or her normal hourly compensation. That means it applies to piece rate and determining the hourly equivalent of variable piece rates gets complicated, Fazio said.

West Coast H-2A minimum wage likely to increase

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The minimum wage for H-2A visa foreign guestworkers in Washington and Oregon likely will rise 5.44 percent to \$13.38 per hour in 2017, making it the highest in the nation, according to WAFLA, formerly the Washington Farm Labor Association.

The rate has been \$12.69 for the past year and goes up every Jan. 1 based on government surveys of regional prevailing wages.

"It appears that the large percentage increases and higher wages for field and livestock workers are symptomatic of a dramatic labor shortage nationwide," said Dan Fazio, WAFLA director.

"It's good news for workers but very tough for farmers," he said.

As the wage increases, it's increasing farmers' production costs, he said.

The mandatory minimum wage for H-2A workers, known as the Adverse Effect Wage Rate, is set by the U.S. Department of Labor based on surveys of prevailing wages of domestic workers by region. It is above state minimum wages and intended to prevent wages of domestic workers from being adversely affected by the importation of foreign workers.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service calculates the AEWR from surveys of field and livestock workers conducted during one week each calendar quarter, Fazio said. On Nov. 17, NASS published the third- and fourth-quarter wage rates along with the entire year's calculations, he said.

Wage surveys conducted by the Washington Employment Security Department are not considered by NASS or DOL but DOL encourages states to do their own surveys, he said.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

H-2A workers thin Gala apples in Zirkle Fruit Co.'s CRO Orchard south of Rock Island, Wash., last July. Zirkle hired 2,889 H-2A workers in 2015 and pays at least the minimum wage, although workers usually make more on piece rate.

These rates are not official until issued by DOL, but it looks like California's AEWR will increase 5.72 percent from \$11.89 to \$12.57 per hour, Fazio said.

The rate for Idaho, Montana and Wyoming likely will decrease slightly from \$11.75 to \$11.66 per hour, he said. The rate in Colorado, Utah and Nevada probably will drop from \$11.27 to \$11 per hour and Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin likely will increase 5.74 percent from \$12.02 to \$12.75 per hour, he said.

The national average will probably go up 3.92 percent from \$11.74 to \$12.20, he said.

Washington growers hired 13,641 H-2A workers in 2016, mostly from Mexico, for pruning and picking tree fruit. Often those workers make more

than the AEWR on piece rate, which is pay for the volume of fruit they pick.

But at a minimum, growers using H-2A workers must pay all their workers, foreign and domestic, the highest of the AEWR, the prevailing hourly wage, a collective bargaining wage, if applicable, or the state or federal minimum wage, Fazio said. "The AEWR becomes the de facto minimum wage for farmers who use H-2A and pay workers by the hour," he said.

The H-2A program allows agricultural employers to hire foreign guestworkers on temporary work visas to fill seasonal jobs. Employers must show a shortage of U.S. workers in the area and provide housing, transportation and a minimum wage.

New Chico State ag dean to keep focus on practical learning

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

CHICO, Calif. — The new dean of California State University-Chico's College of Agriculture says he wants to continue the emphasis on providing a practical education for students.

John Unruh, who took the reins of the university's ag program in August, said its goal has always been to make sure there are job opportunities for students after graduation.

"Our goal is student success," Unruh told the Capital Press. "One unique thing about Chico State is that we emphasize experiential learning. We provide hands-on activities in class, working opportunities on the farm, internships, study



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

John Unruh took over in August as dean of the College of Agriculture at California State University-Chico. He wants to continue the emphasis on providing practical knowledge.

abroad, club activities and competition teams."

Along with all the hands-on work, the university does encour-

age critical thinking and writing skills and a "basic appreciation and knowledge of agriculture," he said.

Unruh came to Chico State from Kansas State University, where he chaired the food science undergraduate program. He replaces Chico State agriculture instructor Dave Daley, who had served as interim dean since 2014.

Having grown up on a diversified crop and cattle farm near Warden, Wash., Unruh received bachelor's and master's degrees at Washington State University before earning a doctorate at KSU in animal science and industry with an emphasis in meat science and beef production.

In Chico, he runs an ag program whose enrollment has more than doubled in the past seven years. It offers four undergraduate degrees

and an online master's degree and includes the 800-acre university farm, which employs a manager and 15 full-time employees and has up to 40 student workers.

Unruh said he's proud to join a program whose competition teams have taken three national championships in the past year — in the academic quadrathlon, animal science and rangeland management.

He became familiar with Chico State's competitive prowess while competing in livestock judging and animal evaluation at WSU, he said. He also was assistant coach of the meat judging team at Kansas State, where he had taught since 1988.

"This is the first time a non-land grant school has won" the academic quadrathlon for animal science, Un-

ruh said. "It says something about the hands-on education at the farm" that students can demonstrate such knowledge, he said.

Unruh arrived at Chico State just after Gayle E. Hutchinson became the university's new president in July. She had been provost and vice president of academic affairs at CSU-Channel Islands.

Unruh said he was drawn to Chico State by the fact that it's small enough to keep class sizes small, that it has opportunities for applied and undergraduate research through partnership with industries, and that it deals with a more diverse set of crops than KSU.

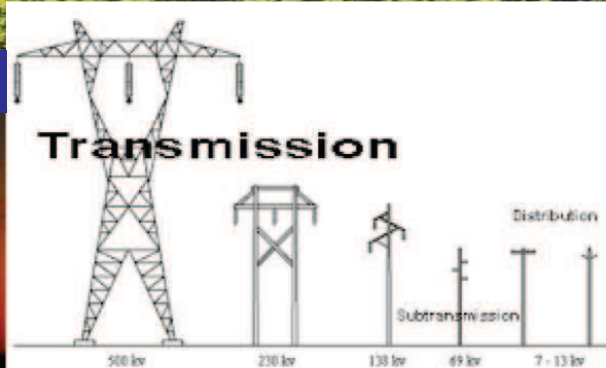
"It's just an opportunity to contribute back to agriculture from all the things I've learned in my career," he said.

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