

EPA has not disclosed how much it spent on What's Upstream

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FOIA request, but had no other comment.

The EPA has released dozens of emails and other documents in partially fulfilling FOIA requests by Save Family Farming and the Capital Press.

The additional records sought by Save Family Farming could clarify EPA Northwest Administrator Dennis McLerran's role in allowing What's Upstream to proceed, Baron said. "They seem to be intent on delaying this until after the administration changes," he said.

Baron also said the records could be relevant to an investigation by the

Washington Public Disclosure Commission.

The PDC may decide as soon as this month whether to take action against the EPA or the Swinomish Indian tribe. The Puget Sound tribe used an EPA grant to hire Seattle lobbying firm Strategies 360 to develop the What's Upstream media campaign to influence state lawmakers. What's Upstream did not report its activities to the PDC.

The tribe denies that the PDC has any jurisdiction over it. The EPA told the PDC that the state agency should let the EPA's inspector general determine whether a grant to the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission was misspent.

A PDC official said Friday that

the agency decided to also ask Strategies 360 to respond to the complaint. The response is due Dec. 20.

The EPA records released so far show that some agency officials were concerned about the tone and accuracy of the tribe-led campaign. Staff members raised questions about whether the campaign was a legal use of EPA funds.

With the issue coming to a head in mid-2015, Swinomish environmental policy director Larry Wasserman met with McLerran. According to EPA meeting notes, McLerran asked Wasserman to soften attacks on agriculture, but also said he didn't see the campaign as a legal issue.

Subsequently, the tribe, in part-

nership with environmental groups, launched a website timed to influence the 2016 Legislature.

Baron said Save Family Farming will not withdraw its FOIA, but may submit a new one more narrowly focused on McLerran's actions after he met with Wasserman.

In his only remarks made public on What's Upstream, McLerran told a House member in a letter that his agency determined the campaign was lawful, and that the EPA could not dictate its content.

With the inspector general's audit unfinished, the EPA in September awarded the 20-tribe Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission \$25 million for Puget Sound projects. The EPA says it has added restrictions to

prevent projects such as What's Upstream from being funded.

U.S. Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., said this month that the agency's response has been inadequate.

The EPA-funded What's Upstream website remains up, but the agency cut off further support last spring when confronted by angry federal lawmakers, who said the campaign falsely accused farmers of being unregulated polluters and violated laws against using federal funds to lobby.

EPA has not disclosed how much it spent on What's Upstream, though records show the campaign had counted on receiving more than \$650,000.

Christmas-related plants a cash-flow source for Northwest growers

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Across the U.S., farmers sold more than \$1.3 billion worth of cut coniferous evergreens in 2014, according to the most recent USDA data. To compare, the total value of cut Christmas trees — the king of the holiday's crops — topped \$366 million that year.

Despite the relatively small market for boughs and Christmas-related plants such as poinsettias and holly, they provide an important niche for Northwest growers, tapping a source of cash flow at a time of year when most other crops have long been harvested.

Christmas color

Poinsettias provide a way for greenhouse nurseries that sell flowering bedding plants in springtime to keep their employees busy during the fall, too.

Last year, growers nationwide sold nearly \$140 million worth of potted poinsettias, according to USDA.

Though the plant isn't particularly profitable, it does provide enough revenue to keep workers who might not otherwise return from being laid off, said Vern Johnson, owner of Johnson Brothers Greenhouses near Eugene, Ore.

Because they're a tropical plant, poinsettias need more heat during the cool months preceding Christmas, adding to the cost of growing them, he said.

They're also prone to fungal disease, requiring frequent sprays and more spacing between plants to ensure proper air circulation.

"It's not a bread-and-butter crop," said Johnson, who also produces bedding plants, perennials, shrubs and trees.

International crop

Poinsettias are a truly international industry, he said.

Breeding occurs in tropical countries such as Costa Rica and Guatemala. Cuttings are then shipped to large greenhouses, where they're rooted. The rooted poinsettias are then sold to greenhouses such as the Johnson Brothers operation for the final stage of production.

Night temperatures must be kept above 65 degrees Fahrenheit for poinsettias, though breeders in recent years have turned their attention to developing varieties that can withstand lower temperatures, Johnson said.



Vern Johnson, owner of Johnson Brothers Greenhouses near Eugene, Ore., examines poinsettias growing in one of his greenhouses.

Photos by Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press



A worker harvests holly with red berries at Mill Creek Holly Farms near Stayton, Ore.



Christmas decorations made with holly grown at Mill Creek Holly Farms near Stayton, Ore.

Christmas cactuses are more profitable because they're not as sensitive to cold and prone to diseases as poinsettias, Peterson said.

"They require a lot of attention," he said.

The nursery has dispatched an efficient remedy to combat the white flies, aphids and thrips that feast on poinsettias: Baskets of mullein — a common roadside plant with leathery leaves — are hung throughout the greenhouse.

The mullein harbors a beneficial bug, dicyphus hesperus, which eats the pests, Peterson said. "We're always trying to find additional ways to reduce pesticide use."

Holly threats

While poinsettias are finicky because of their tropical origins, farmers also encounter

difficulties with a Christmas crop that naturally thrives in the region — holly.

The plant is vulnerable to phytophthora, a genus of fungal-like pathogens that damage it.

"There's no cure for it. All you can do is try to prevent it," said Don Harteloo, who owns Mill Creek Holly Farms near Stayton, Ore.

More than \$1 million worth of cut holly was sold in the U.S. in 2014, according to the latest USDA data.

Fungicide sprays are necessary during the rainy season, and during summer dead leaves and other debris are vacuumed from beneath the holly trees to keep the disease away.

Unless a grower is aggressive in fighting the pathogen, it can defoliate and wipe out



Christmas cactuses are grown at Fessler Nursery near Woodburn, Ore. The plants must be covered part of each day to make them flower.

an entire orchard, especially in a year like 2016, when disease pressure has been high, said Harteloo.

"It seems to be getting worse all the time, and this seems to be a particularly bad year," he said.

Once a healthy holly tree is established, which takes about a decade, branches can be cut vigorously each year, Harteloo said.

Cutting seems to stimulate growth, so overly zealous harvesters have never been a problem, he said.

Harteloo and his wife, Sue, sell their holly to wholesale buyers. They also make wreaths and other decorations, which are sold online.

Most buyers want red berries on their holly and prefer variegated cultivars with leaves that have cream-colored edges, Sue Harteloo said.

To prevent leaves and berries from falling off after harvest, the branches are dipped in a rare plant hormone, Don Harteloo said.

"It's very expensive. A thousand dollars a gallon," he said.

Harvest by shotgun

The Harteloos also sell "kissing balls" that incorporate mistletoe, a parasitic plant that infects oak trees.

A farmer near Silverton has enough mistletoe growing wild on his property to supply their yearly needs.

"It doesn't take much to go a long ways," Harteloo said.

The mistletoe is collected using ladders or shears on long poles, but when it's particularly inaccessible, Harteloo resorts to firearms.

"You can shoot it down, usually with a shotgun," he said.



Courtesy U.S. Department of Agriculture
A new USDA report says that while European consumers reject genetically modified food products, European farmers are eager to feed GMO corn and soybeans to their livestock because it's cheaper and more readily available than non-GMO feed.

Vandalism, uncertainty make genetic engineering an unattractive investment

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European farmers are expected to annually harvest 2.2 million metric tons of soybeans in 2016 and 2017, up from 1.8 million metric tons in 2014 and 2015, USDA said.

Even if they succeed, however, that production will still be dwarfed by the 32 million metric tons of soybeans the continent imports annually, the report said.

Much of those imports come from the U.S. and other countries where a majority of commodity crops are genetically engineered.

Meanwhile, the prospect of developing genetically engineered crops suitable for growing in

"It's a mixed bag. We're only one GMO ban away from not being viewed as reliable."

Mary Boote, executive director of the Global Farmer Network

Europe has ground to a halt, the USDA found.

"Repeated vandalism of test plots by activists, together with the uncertainty and delays of the EU approval process, makes genetic engineering an unattractive investment," the report said.

While the European Union is a reliable market for U.S. soybeans and corn byproducts, such as distillers dried grains from ethanol production, the situation is precarious, said Mary Boote, executive director of the Global Farmer Network, a

pro-trade and pro-GE nonprofit.

"It's a mixed bag," she said. "We're only one GMO ban away from not being viewed as reliable."

In 2017, for example, Poland is scheduled to prohibit the import of livestock feed produced from biotech crops, according to FAS.

In the past, though, the ban has been twice delayed because of opposition from the country's livestock industry.

Such potential disruptions create a great deal of

uncertainty, since they're politically motivated, said Boote. "That's a tenuous position to be in from a marketing angle."

For biotech critics, the higher price commanded by conventional crops in Europe could inspire more farmers to diversify away from genetically engineered varieties.

"Usually, with the non-GE market, there's something of a price premium," said Doug Gurian-Sherman, director of sustainable agriculture for the Center for Food Safety, a nonprofit critical of biotechnology.

It's unclear whether these premiums are enough to overcome the labor-saving economic advantages of crops that have been genet-

ically engineered to withstand herbicides and repel insects, he said.

"Is that demand being satisfied, and if not, why?" Gurian-Sherman said.

European consumers appear to draw a distinction between biotech crops used for human food — which must be labeled and are generally resisted by consumers — and livestock feed, which consumers have grudgingly accepted, he said.

Livestock is essentially viewed as a "filter" for biotech crops, so it's unlikely Europe's reliance on biotech feed will translate to growing acceptance of genetically engineered food crops, Gurian-Sherman said.

"It's an interesting conundrum," he said.