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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Checkoff debate exposes organic split

A proposal to create a checkoff to finance production research and promotion for organic producers and handlers has exposed a rift in the industry.

The checkoff is being pushed by the Organic Trade Association, a trade group that represents 8,500 organic growers, processors and shippers. The USDA is taking comments on the plan. Supporters say the checkoff could raise more than \$30 million annually for the organic industry to use for production-based research, on-farm technical assistance, consumer and producer education and brand promotion.

There is stiff opposition to the proposal, and falls along arguments that are familiar to discussions of all things organic.

What is the real character of the organic industry?

Are small producers more ideologically organic than larger producers?

As with all checkoff proposals, some producers don't think such a fund, voluntary or not, is needed. The industry has thus far grown to a \$43 billion market, well, organically. It is a movement largely without leaders, comprising mostly small and fiercely independent farmers. It has grown into a big business by eschewing most "commercial" trappings.

Large-scale producers have arrived relatively recently to the party as wider demand has increased the viability of



a commercial-sized business model.

Supporters had originally wanted all producers and processors to be obligated to pay the assessment. The assessment is pegged at one-tenth of 1 percent of net organic sales. The USDA amended the proposal to exempt mandatory participation by producers with less than \$250,000 of gross sales.

By that standard, as many as 60 percent of organic producers would be exempt. Individual exempt producers could voluntarily participate if they agree to pay the assessment in four out of the initial seven years of the program if it's

established by voters.

But only those who participate can vote. Opponents say every producer should have an equal vote to determine whether the program is instituted.

We sympathize with the argument. But it's unrealistic to demand a voice in the creation and operation of a program you don't support financially.

Opponents have some legitimate concerns about farmers not having a big enough say in the program's management, and the amount of money allocated to production research. The real issue, however, comes down to arguments about who is, and who is not, a true organic producer.

A large number of organic producers don't make their living in agriculture. They rightly call

themselves farmers because they bring a crop to market, but they probably have full-time jobs elsewhere. Nothing wrong with that. To make a living from farming, whether conventional or organic, you must produce at a scale that will soon press the boundaries of "big."

Factions within the industry say that big producers and processors don't follow the spirit or letter of the rules, and are dominating the regulatory bodies. It's a legitimate concern if true.

The industry needs to resolve these issues. Everyone must follow the same rules, and everyone must have a place.

Until everyone is on the same page, promotion would be pointless.

OUR VIEW



Associated Press File
Pesticides help all types of farmers, ranchers and forest managers.

Don't gut Oregon's 'Right to Farm' law

A bill in the Oregon Legislature is sure to draw the attention of the state's farmers, ranchers and forest managers.

It would gut the state's "Right to Farm and Forest" law.

All 50 states have similar laws that protect farmers, ranchers and forest managers from nuisance or trespass lawsuits filed by neighbors or others who do not approve of how a farm is operated.

These laws are based on common sense. They protect farmers and forest managers from people who don't understand or don't approve of certain practices. Among them are making noise, kicking up dust or applying weed killers or other pesticides.

"Right to Farm" laws were written with the recognition that farms and forests need

to be managed to be financial sustainable. The Oregon law even states that "farming and forest practices are critical to the economic welfare of this state."

The law also protects activities as long as they are done in a reasonable and prudent manner. That means pesticide labels must be followed and neighboring crops can't be damaged.

It doesn't say anything about whether a complaint can be based on philosophical disagreements about how a farm or forest is managed.

Senate Bill 499 would remove the protections for pesticide use in the current law. A key change would allow anyone who sues a farmer over pesticide use and loses to avoid paying attorney fees to the farmer.

This in essence voids a major purpose of the law, which was

written to protect farmers and forest managers, not put them at risk for using pesticides.

In other words, farmers and forest managers who face even a frivolous legal attack for using pesticides could never get their attorney fees from the losers.

That is unfair. If that and other ill-considered changes are made, the Legislature might as well change the name of the law to the "Right to Hassle Farmers and Foresters."

Pesticides are an important part of agriculture. Without them, costs will spiral out of control, and weeds and bugs will overtake crops.

That's why the practices of farmers, ranchers and forest managers must continue to be protected by the Oregon Legislature. The best way to do that is to reject SB 499.

Time for the people to take back power over Calif. water

By BRUCE COLBERT
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Bruce Colbert



The California State Water Resources Control Board is now the greatest threat facing water users in the state, a threat that can best be overcome by returning power to the People of California.

The Board claims that double the current environmental flows from the San Joaquin River and tributaries must be taken for fish. The Board, with complete indifference, calls the resultant community and economic devastation an "unavoidable impact."

For the Board, the environment comes first; people and agriculture come last.

The Board's 2010 Delta flow criteria seek to cut Delta water exports for contractors 50 percent — 75 percent of the Sacramento River and Delta flows are needed for the environment.

The Board curtails water use, even by riparian and senior water rights appropriators using water for a recognized beneficial use, when fish or habitat is threatened.

The Board alters releases from the state's reservoirs — designed to hold a five-year supply of water — which are drained in the midst of drought for the alleged benefit of fish.

The Board takes over groundwater basin planning to reverse overdraft to protect the environment.

The Board's report, "Making Water Conservation a California Way of Life," outlines mandatory water use reductions through 2025 and thereafter. The Board creates water shortages through regulation.

More to come

Given its political setting as part of CalEPA, the Board will continue its environmental activism for the foreseeable future. The Board's members are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Senate. The chair was the Western director of the Natural Resources Defense Council and the vice chair was a director of the National Audubon Society, both highly litigious environmental organizations. The state government is beholden to such organizations.

U.S. Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., met with NRDC and other environmental activist organizations in 2002 regarding the future of the San Joaquin Valley.

"Their goal was to remove 1.3 million acres of farmland from production," said Nunes. "From Merced all the way down to Bakersfield, and on the entire west side of the Valley as well as part of the east side, productive agriculture would end, and the land would return to some ideal state of nature."

Water cutbacks

NRDC and other groups filed two lawsuits on the Coordinated Operations of the Central Valley Project and State Water Project in the Sacramento-San Joaquin

River Delta, which led to severe cutbacks in water to farmland and to 25 million people. NRDC led a successful lawsuit to force the release of water from Friant Dam for fish.

Wildlands Project founder Reed Noss stated, "...the native ecosystem and the collective needs of non-human species must take precedence over the needs and desires of humans..."

"The world has cancer and the cancer is man," cites the Club of Rome, a think tank.

"Environmental extremists are anti-human. ... And they are just plain anti-civilization," said Patrick Moore, founder of Greenpeace.

Environmental activists want to make it impossible for the state to grow. By preventing the construction of reservoirs, and by obtaining water allocations for fish, environmental activists eliminate the water needed for growth.

Environmental activists' answer to how much water the environment needs is "just a little more." The environment consumes 50 percent of the dedicated water supply; agriculture 40 percent, and urban uses 10 percent. Only 24 percent of the water flowing through the Delta is diverted to water users to the south; 76 percent runs into the ocean. Ninety percent of the water from all of the proposed reservoirs already is allocated for environmental uses.

Time to act

It is time for farmers, ranchers, businesses, industries, and water districts to move beyond hoping that political connections will keep their slice of a shrinking pie, or seeing one another as competitors. Rather — work together, overlook an offense, answer a call, make a call, and unite.

The solution is to return power back to the People of California. A state initiative would establish in the California Constitution — above the reach of politicians, bureaucrats, special interests or judges — that highest priorities of beneficial water use are: first, domestic use, and second, irrigation use. This constitutional amendment would direct how the Board and other government agencies could allocate water.

Only the People can change these priorities. The California Water Alliance Initiative Committee intends to qualify an initiative for the November 2018 ballot.

Bruce Colbert, AICP, is executive director of the *Property Owners Association of Riverside County, Calif.*

The association is a nonprofit, public policy research, lobbying and educational organization formed in 1983 to promote free enterprise and economic growth and to protect private property rights.

Readers' views

Washington needs to follow law on elk

Why don't Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) officials just obey the state law? Why can't DFW do as RCW 77.04.012 mandates the DFW department and commission to do as managers of the elk herd in eastern Skagit County and keep elk from damaging private property?

Why can't DFW abide by state law, which states DFW shall in no way allow their elk "to infringe on the right of a private property owner to control the owner's private property?"

Why does DFW admit they have no true actual elk

count numbers in the county?

Why are DFW officials not listening to the local DFW biologist and conflict specialist?

Twelve months ago DFW scientists verified an elk in the Skagit County herd tested positive for hoof rot disease. Yet, DFW officials have completely ignored addressing this major disease outbreak except to propose more studies, as they have in Southwest Washington for past 8 years with no answers or results. The epidemic foot rot disease is killing elk in many Southwest Washington counties now.

This same disease spreads to our beef and dairy cattle, which will cause devastating economic losses to our Skagit County livestock owners and industry.

Is it the incompetence of DFW officials in management skills and knowledge in elk management or are a few top DFW brass afraid of political retribution if they obey the law?

Should livestock management classes be required for DFW officials to manage elk herds? After all, we as livestock owners must manage our farm animals or face fines of animal cruelty, trespass and liability for animal accidents on highways.

Do you know you can call DFW Regional Director if elk are causing grief and damage to your property at 425-775-1311 and also contact your state legislators at 800-562-6000 and let them know?

Randy Good
Sedro Woolley, Wash.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

Letters policy: Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.