

# Washington

## Overseas buyers praise industry for GE wheat handling, but questions remain

Herron: 'No cause is not an answer'

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

Wheat buyers overseas praised the transparency of the industry during the investigation into volunteer Roundup Ready wheat found in a fallow Washington field in 2016, but reiterated their zero tolerance for genetically modified wheat.

Washington Grain Commission CEO Glen Squires, board members Mike Miller, Dana Herron and Washington State University Extension Director Rich Koenig recently toured Japan, South Korea and the Philippines to meet with customers.

The tour was for several reasons. Squires also wanted the customers' perspective on how the incident was handled.

Japan and South Korea both temporarily suspended wheat tenders until they received updated testing protocols for the GE wheat from Monsanto, which developed the wheat that was found.

"We recognize it was a challenging time for both them and us, and we wanted to know how they viewed what transpired," Squires said.



Capital Press File

The Washington Wheat Commission says overseas buyers have praised the industry's handling of the discovery of volunteer Roundup Ready wheat plants found last year in a fallow field in Washington, but are disappointed investigators have not been able to explain how the incident occurred.

An executive told the commission the industry got an "A+" for handling the situation, for keeping them informed and keeping it out of consumer hands, Herron said.

Herron said the commission's repeated trips to the customer countries have established a relationship with the buyers.

"It goes without saying we certainly do not want to test this trust with another GE event," he said.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in Japan and company executives wanted to know what the Washington reps thought was

the cause.

"Of course, we don't know the cause," Herron said.

In December, the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service closed its investigation.

"APHIS could not determine how these volunteers came to exist in the fallow field after exhausting all leads and resources," said Rick Coker, a public affairs specialist for APHIS.

GE wheat was also detected in Oregon in 2013 and Montana in 2014.

The agency verified that all three GE glyphosate-resistant wheat detections came from APHIS-authorized field tests

of GE wheat planted more than a decade ago, Coker said.

APHIS in 2016 established new requirements for GE wheat field trials, such as permit conditions imposing additional record keeping and reporting requirements and extended post-harvest monitoring periods. The new rules are a "significant" step in preventing similar incidents, Coker said.

"However, additional detections of GE wheat related to the early field trials are possible," he said.

Herron said the lack of conclusions is still a concern.

"No cause" is not an answer," he said. "Our customers don't like that answer, I don't like that answer, the Washington wheat industry as a whole doesn't like that answer."

A future event would have to involve a federal investigation on the highest level, he said.

"With all the transition and political upheaval in Washington, D.C., I kind of doubt it's at the top of the agenda," he said.

"We hope and anticipate it won't happen again," Squires said. "But, if it does, regardless of where it happens, the point is we need to have as close communication with our overseas customers as we can."

## Shrink the EPA? Speaker says he has a way

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

KENNEWICK, Wash. — Most of the Environmental Protection Agency's responsibilities should be delegated to the states, a speaker told potato farmers at last week's Washington-Oregon Potato Conference in Kennewick, Wash.

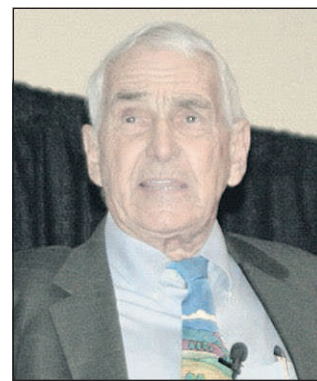
Keynote speaker Jay Lehr, science director of the Heartland Institute, economist and futurist, also said regulations would be dramatically reduced under Trump.

Lehr said he is the last living scientist who was involved in the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency, which he said worked well for about 10 years before it was taken over in 1980 by "environmental zealots, activists and green organizations."

Lehr recently wrote a plan to shrink the EPA over a five-year period. The plan includes turning over the agency's responsibilities to the individual states, and is in the hands of key people in Washington, D.C., including Scott Pruitt, Trump's nominee for EPA administrator, Lehr said.

The move would reduce the number of EPA employees from 15,000 nationwide to 300 and reduce an \$8 billion budget for environmental protection to \$2 billion, with each state getting a grant of \$20 million, Lehr said.

Beyond that, he said, "The ability to take away from us the tools we use — the pesticides and fertilizers always under attack from anti-ag people, that is



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Keynote speaker Jay Lehr, science director of the Heartland Institute, talks about future trends in agriculture during the Washington Oregon Potato Conference Jan. 25 in Kennewick, Wash.

really going to be history."

Also under Trump, Lehr expects farmers will see a reduction in fear over carbon dioxide and recognition that "man does not control the temperature of our planet."

National Potato Council CEO John Keeling said Trump's transition so far has been fairly normal compared to past presidents, but he expects lots of uncertainty from his administration.

"I think for President Trump, having a lot of people off-balance in some of these issues is something he thinks plays to his strengths," Keeling said.

Keeling said Trump's regulatory reforms are good for agriculture and small business. He expects Trump's team to target narrow, specific regulations and the way regulations are promulgated.

## Food forum picks up where roundtable left off, backers say

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Washington Farm Bureau and a free-market policy center say they are concerned a new state-funded panel will become a platform for espousing more regulations on farmers.

The food policy forum was authorized by lawmakers a year ago and is just getting organized by the Washington State Conservation Commission.

The forum is charged with making recommendations to lawmakers in the fall on improving "food systems." It has yet to set goals or have members, but it's also already associated with the Washington State Food System Roundtable.

The roundtable is the product of an older state government initiative. Made up primarily of government agencies and nonprofit organizations, the roundtable will soon release a "25-year vision for a healthy, just and sustainable food system."

House Bill 1562 calls on the food policy forum to "coordinate with" and "build on" the work of the roundtable. The bill also would push to 2018 the deadline for making recommendations to the Legislature.

A draft of the roundtable's report offered a wide range of goals, including minimizing greenhouse gases, protecting shorelines and "incentivizing third-party audits that ensure socially just farmworker conditions."

The roundtable weighed in on subjects as diverse as wages, soda taxes and breast-feeding in the workplace.

The roundtable's co-chairman, Vic Colman, a public health consultant, told the Capital Press that he did not expect the final report to differ much from the draft.

The state Department of Agriculture, which was part of the roundtable, complained last year the group had strayed from its original mission to look at hunger, nutrition and farmland preservation.

The Farm Bureau's director of government relations, Tom Davis, made the same charge at a hearing Feb. 2 in front of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. "We felt it's been more divisive than unifying," he said.

The Farm Bureau, Davis said, would support a forum to "make sure that every child that goes to bed at night has a



Courtesy of WSDA

Washington state lawmakers are considering a bill to support a forum to develop recommendations for improving the production and distribution of food. The Farm Bureau and Washington Policy Center are asking legislators to make sure the forum doesn't follow the example of the Washington State Food System Roundtable.

full stomach, and that's really what we think we should focus on."

HB 1562's prime sponsor, Rep. Mia Gregerson, D-Sea-Tac, said she did not intend for her bill to be an extension of the roundtable and that she would be open to amending the legislation. She said she wanted the forum to unite people.

"The food system in Washington state is very complicated, and there hasn't been a forum where everybody is considered equal in order to make sure that we're taking care of the people of Washington state," she said.

The conservation com-

mission estimates extending the life of the food policy forum to 2018 would cost \$209,000, in addition to the \$50,000 appropriated last year.

Washington Policy Center agriculture policy analyst Madilynne Clark told the House committee that the market responds to food demands.

"We are a very trade dependent nation, so why are we focusing on local food when we can already let the market provide good, strong agriculture by doing what we do best — grow potatoes, grow apples, export our crops?" she said. "My concern is this bill will make us have one more

layer of bureaucratic regulations that farmers will have to navigate."

Colman said he anticipated criticism, but didn't agree that the roundtable took on too much. "We're trying to grab all the elements you would want to grab in a food system," he said.

Conservation commission policy director Ron Shultz said he expects the forum to keep a tighter focus, emphasizing how small farmers can distribute their crops, increasing the supply of locally grown food.

"I think the roundtable did stray too far," he said. "I think the forum is an opportunity to rethink it."

## Washington House takes 'step one' on rural wells

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Tribes and environmentalists asked lawmakers Tuesday to leave intact a state Supreme Court decision that a Washington Farm Bureau lobbyist said has made building rural homes "way too hard."

The House Agriculture and Natural Resources took up legislation responding to the court's Hirst decision. The ruling, issued in October, requires landowners to prove that each new household well won't siphon too much water from streams and rivers.

Defenders of the ruling say the decision will protect fish by preserving state-set minimum flows. Critics say the wells use little water and that ruling will make houses too costly to build and maybe impossible in some places.

"What you've got under Hirst is an awful lot of folks in an awful lot of counties, I think every county in the state sooner or later, who will have an awful hard time getting a home built — thousands and thousands of people," Farm Bureau associate director of government relations Evan Sheffels said.

"Our members need to

build homes for their employees. They need to build for their sons and daughters who want to come home and farm, and this makes it way too hard," he said.

The hearing showed bipartisan support for easing the burden placed by the court on individual landowners, though legislators are divided on how far to go in revising the Hirst decision.

House Bill 1885 would essentially undo the ruling, restoring the state's policy of routinely allowing wells that draw up to 5,000 gallons a day.

House Bill 1918 would phase in the ruling, giving landowners who already have invested in building and septic permits time to build.

Bills to either implement or nullify the Hirst decision also are pending in the Senate. HB 1885 prime sponsor Larry Springer, D-Kirkland, said he expected lawmakers to reach a compromise.

"It is a critical issue, especially in rural Washington, that we absolutely have to solve, and we have to solve it this session. There's a bunch of us who are absolutely committed to do that. This is step one — this hearing today."

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