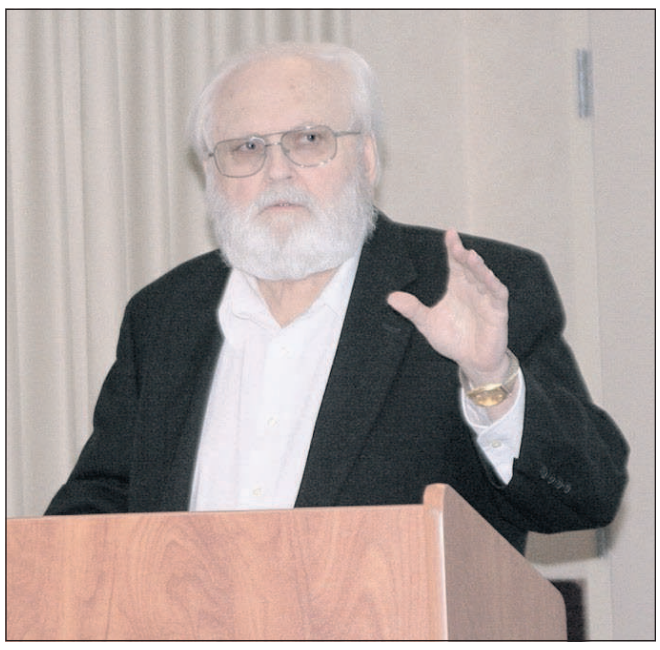
Trump a 'mixed bag' for ag, policy expert says

Flinchbaugh: Wheat, cotton must join forces for farm bill

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press
Kansas State University agricultural economics professor emeritus Barry Flinchbaugh talks about agriculture policy under President Donald Trump Feb. 21 during a Washington Association of Wheat Growers workshop in Airway Heights, Wash.

AIRWAY HEIGHTS, Wash. – President Donald Trump's first month in office proved he can do the job when he wants to, says a longtime agriculture policy expert.

Trump so far is a "mixed bag" for agriculture, said Barry Flinchbaugh, professor emeritus for Kansas State University's Department of Agricultural Economics.

Flinchbaugh spoke in Airway Heights, Wash., as part of a Washington Association of Wheat Growers workshop.

Flinchbaugh gave Trump an A-plus in deregulating agriculture, an A in GMO labeling and a B in immigration and biofuels.

Trump gets a D in climate change, Flinchbaugh said, lamenting that belief in science appears to be declining.

"When you believe less in science, you believe more in political crap," he said.

He said GMOs and climate change are scientific issues that have no business in politics.

"Today's extremists want it both ways — the food fad extremist is absolutely convinced that GMOs will kill but climate change is abnormal, comes from fossil fuels, et cetera," he said. "There are some extremists in the ag community who believe that GMOs are not harmful, but nothing is happening with the climate. You can't have it both ways. You either believe in science or you don't."

Trump didn't fare so well in trade, receiving a C or D for his positions on the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the North American Free Trade Agreement.

"He blew it right out of the chute by pulling the plug on TPP the first week," Flinchbaugh said. The trade deal would have been "the most lucrative trade agreement ever negotiated" on behalf of agriculture, adding $5 billion per year and giving the United States equality compared to, or even an advantage over China, he said.

"We're pulling the plug on what we really needed," he said. "Whether we can turn this around or not, I don't know."

Flinchbaugh is hopeful for Trump's nominee for secretary of agriculture, former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, a veterinarian who also knows the wheat and feed grains business.

"In agriculture, all these years, we've refused to learn ... that if you're going to get a (farm bill) that works, cotton and wheat have to get together," Flinchbaugh said. "He's in a very unique position to pull that off, because he's a grain farmer from cotton country."

Perdue is very capable, Flinchbaugh said, but "I do worry a little bit whether or not he's willing to look Trump in the eye and tell him he's full of s---. It clearly needs to be done sometimes."

The biggest discussion during the negotiations of the new farm bill will be the relationship between crop insurance and food stamps under the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Food stamps and nutrition programs make up 85 percent of USDA's budget, Flinchbaugh said, and ag loses its position at the bargaining table without them.

"Urban congressmen will vote for crop insurance if rural congressmen support food programs," he said.

Washington dairies, environmentalists appeal Ecology's CAFO manure rules

State department stands by pending regulations

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Don Jenkins/Capital Press
Dairy cows in a barn in Whatcom County, Wash. Both dairy and environmental groups are appealing the state Department of Ecology's new rules for how dairies store and spread manure.

The Washington Department of Ecology's new rules for dairies are under legal attack by farm groups and environmentalists.

Both sides are asking a state appeals board to order Ecology to rewrite the regulations for storing and spreading manure.

The Washington State Dairy Federation claims the rules will financially cripple dairies and actually raise nitrate levels in fields.

Meanwhile, a coalition of seven environmental groups allege Ecology didn't go far enough to keep nitrates from polluting water.

Ecology spokeswoman Sandy Howard said Wednesday that Ecology stands by the rules and will put them into effect as planned March 3.

"There was a lot of diligence that went into them," she said.

Under the rules, as many as 230 dairies with at least 200 cows must obtain a concentrated animal feeding operation permit, or risk penalties. Dairies that discharge pollutants into surface water or groundwater need a permit, according to Ecology.

Ecology has not identified the dairies, but the department maintains that manure seeps from lagoons, even those built to federal standards, putting virtually all dairies at risk of releasing pollutants.

Previously, few dairies needed a CAFO permit. Ecology expanded the permit's scope to regulate dairies in a fashion similar to factories that discharge wastewater. Since the new rules were announced in January, no dairy has applied for a permit, Howard said.

The appeals by the dairy industry and environmentalists will be heard by the Pollution Control Hearings Board. The three-member state board hears challenges to Ecology's decisions.

The dairy federation, joined by the Washington Farm Bureau, said in a written complaint that Ecology low balled how much the rules will cost farmers.

An Ecology report said permit fees, testing fields, and assessing and repairing manure lagoons could range from about $2,000 to well over $300,000.

The federation says Ecology failed to consider significant costs related to holding more and spreading less manure.

Farmers will lose crop production, especially because of increased riparian buffers, and may have to reconstruct lagoons, reduce herds and acquire more land, according to the federation.

Organic farms that can't substitute commercial fertilizer for manure will have lower yields, the federation stated.

The federation also complained that spring soil tests are unnecessary and could delay planting, leading to more crop failures and leaving more nitrate in the ground.

Environmentalists claimed dairies should be required to double-line manure lagoons with synthetic material and install groundwater monitoring wells.

They also criticized Ecology for not naming which dairies need a CAFO permit and for issuing two permit types.

One version will be available to dairies that don't discharge pollutants into surface water, but may discharge into groundwater. Since the federal Clean Water Act does not apply to groundwater, environmentalists would not be able to sue dairies in federal court, alleging permit violations.

Environmentalists argue groundwater and surface water are connected and regulating them separately amounts to "scientific fiction."

The groups filing the appeal are the Puget Soundkeeper Alliance, Friends of Toppenish Creek, Community Association for Restoration of the Environment, Sierra Club, Waterkeeper Alliance, Center for Food Safety and RE Sources for Sustainable Communities.

Courtesy of WSDA
Washington marijuana farmers want to be included in the state's right-to-farm law.

Pot growers in Washington seek right-to-farm protection

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Washington marijuana growers want to take another step toward joining mainstream agriculture, though their presence may raise questions about taxes and labor law.

Cannabis advocates are championing legislation to insert marijuana into the state's right-to-farm law.

The law bars new neighbors from claiming dust, odors and noise from an existing farm's lawful operations are a nuisance.

Outdoor marijuana farms in particular need protection from disgruntled neighbors, the advocates say.

"We are intimately aware that there are people who do not like cannabis," said Lara Kaminsky, executive director of the Cannabis Alliance, an advocacy group.

Washington voters legalized recreational pot in 2012, and production and sales are flourishing. The state has 1,128 licensed marijuana producers. Retail pot sales totaled $972.7 million for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2016, according to the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board. Sales for this fiscal year already have topped $984 million.

Currently, however, Washington's right-to-farm law specifically excludes marijuana. The House agriculture committee recently voted 11-4 to reverse that policy.

House Bill 1692 prime sponsor Rep. Vincent Buys, R-Lynden, said the law shouldn't discriminate against marijuana — anymore than it does against beer-essential hops or wine-producing grapes.

"Regardless of how we feel about the end product, it should be considered agriculture," he said.

The bill could affect more than nuisance lawsuits.

As passed by the agriculture committee, the bill makes it clear that marijuana growers would continue to pay business and occupation taxes.

Farmers who sell other agricultural products are exempt from paying the tax on wholesale income.

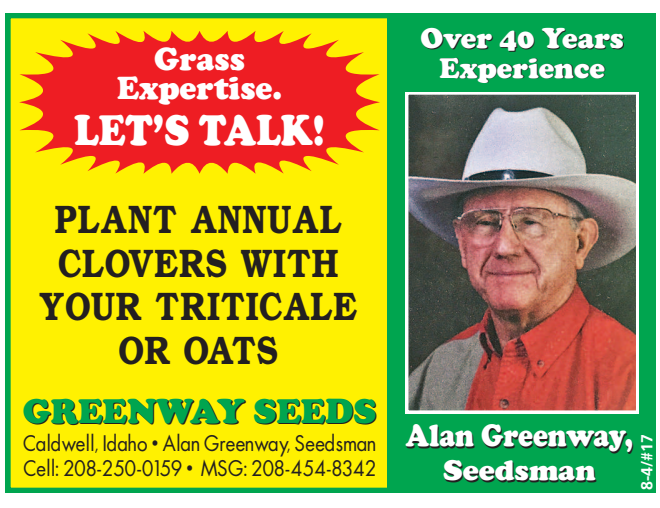
More controversially, the Democratic-led committee excluded marijuana growers from the state's farm labor law.

The law exempts farms from having to pay overtime.

Buys and other Republicans objected to the amendment, which was suggested by United Food and Commercial Workers lobbyist Seamus Petrie. The union is seeking to organize the marijuana industry's workforce.

One marijuana grower testified that in an emergency he needs workers to put in long hours, just like other farms.

So far, mainstay farm groups have been largely absent from the debate. The Washington Farm Bureau remains mostly silent on marijuana. "We don't advocate for crops that are illegal under federal law. Simple as that," Tom Davis, the Farm Bureau's director of government relations, said.

The issue may get more attention, however, if the House passes over to the Senate a bill that would bring marijuana farms into the agricultural fold, but set a precedent by excluding its workers from farm labor law.

"That will probably raise some red flags for the ag folks," Davis said.