

Washington

State Farm Bureau joins suit against pay, sick leave law

Groups go to court to test initiative's constitutionality

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

The Washington Farm Bureau and other business groups are suing to overturn the initiative that raised the minimum wage and mandated paid sick leave, pointing to a 2016 state Supreme Court ruling to bolster their claim the double-barreled measure is unconstitutional.

The lawsuit contends Initiative 1433 imposed two policies. Washington's constitution limits initiatives to one subject, an article the high court cited last year in voiding a tax-cutting measure sponsored by Tim Eyman.

Farm Bureau CEO John Stuhlmiller said Friday that he hopes the Supreme Court will apply the same reasoning to I-1433, though he acknowledged it's been a long time since the high court sided with his organization.

"That weighs heavily on

everybody's mind," he said. "Candidly, I don't want to go to the Supreme Court for anything."

I-1433 passed statewide in November with 57 percent of the vote, but failed in every county east of the Cascades. Several Western Washington counties also voted against the measure, but it won by lopsided margins in the most populous Puget Sound counties. The initiative was championed by unions and community activists. Gov. Jay Inslee collected signatures to qualify it for the ballot.

After I-143 passed, former Supreme Court Justice Phil Talmadge approached business groups about challenging the initiative. Talmadge referred questions to Patrick Connor, state director of the National Federation of Independent Business.

"There was substantial conversation about the likelihood of success, but ultimately we decided the challenge was worth the time and cost," Connor said.

Talmadge launched the challenge this month by filing

suit in Kittitas County Superior Court. I-1433 failed in the Central Washington county and it's where the suit's lead plaintiff, hay farmer and exporter Brad Haberman, lives. Haberman is second vice president of the Farm Bureau. Kittitas County farmer Mark Charlton and Chelan County farmer Bill Wirth also are plaintiffs, along with the trade groups funding the lawsuit.

The state has yet to file a response, an attorney general's office spokesman said.

The Farm Bureau has highlighted the case's similarities to the challenge to Eyman's I-1366.

I-1366 required lawmakers to either cut the sales tax or hold a public vote on amending the constitution to make future tax increases tougher. In defending the initiative, the attorney general's office argued the measure was demanding the Legislature take just one action.

A King County judge ruled the measure violated the one-subject rule and also sought to amend the state constitution through unconstitutional means.

Road closures delay potato planting

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

With about 170,000 acres of potatoes to plant, many farmers in the Columbia Basin face delays caused by flooding and road closures, a potato industry leader says.

Planting typically begins around this time, said Dale Lathim, executive director of the Potato Growers of Washington, but almost no field work has been done yet.

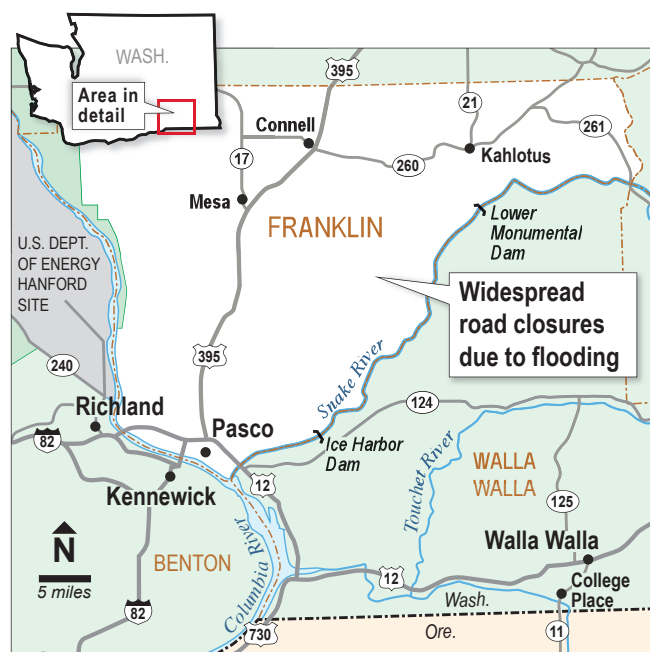
Frozen ground caused by the colder winter combined with rain and snow melt has caused flooding across the region.

Lathim is particularly concerned about the impact of road closures and restrictions in Franklin County and, to a lesser extent, Benton and Grant counties.

Spring flooding washed out some roads or made the roadbeds unstable. The county has set load restrictions until the dirt roads firm up.

It's unusually widespread through Franklin County, with load restrictions on almost every road that isn't all-season, Lathim said.

"As you can imagine, a 10-wheeler loaded with potato seed is quite heavy and would far exceed the load restric-



tions," he said. "It's going to cause a logistical issue."

Some seed-cutting operations are not on all-season roads, Lathim said.

"With the roads the way they are, even if the fields were ready to go, we'd have a hard time getting seed to them right now," Lathim said. "We don't know how long it's going to be until they're operational and usable."

Growers will try to find a way to work around the closures, possibly using field roads instead of county roads, he said.

Farmers typically stagger planting. When the soil becomes ready, a crop that normally would have been planted over three weeks will be planted at the same time. It will be difficult for fertilizer and chemical companies to service all the acres at once, Lathim said.

Harvest will likely not be affected, Lathim said.

"It will be the weather between when we plant and harvest that will determine that, moreso than the actual planting date," he said.



Conservation district growing urban ag network

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

SPOKANE — The Spokane Conservation District is developing a network as a way to connect urban farmers with one another.

Pat Munts, small farm and acreage coordinator for Washington State University Extension in Spokane County, is directing the effort.

"It would pull together all the groups and people who have been working for years on little, individual projects scattered all over the place, so we can communicate about who has what resources, who needs what resources," Munts said.

The group will advocate for urban agriculture and related issues the public needs to think about, Munts said.

The Spokane City Council and Mayor David Condon are already showing support for the project.

Munts considers urban agriculture in several levels: backyard gardeners growing vegetables for personal use, those raising small livestock such as chickens, goats, pigs and sheep; and those raising vegetables on a city lot to sell at a farmers' market.

The last category is probably the least developed idea so far, she said.

"That part is going to take a lot more development at this point," she said. "We have a few, but there's a lot of things we have to work out with the city about what lots would be available, how would we get water to them, is the soil quality up to what it needs to be?"

Urban farmers need the skills to operate in an urban area, including dealing with different "critters" running around — "four-footed and two-footed," Munts said — and city land use ordinances about management.

So far, roughly 25 people are attending meetings.

The district received a \$47,000 grant from the National Association of Conservation Districts last year to encourage urban ag conservation improvements, such as water and soil management.

Contact Munts at pmunts@spokanecounty.org or 509-477-2173.



Pat Munts

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