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Idaho

Environmental group appeals Gateway West line

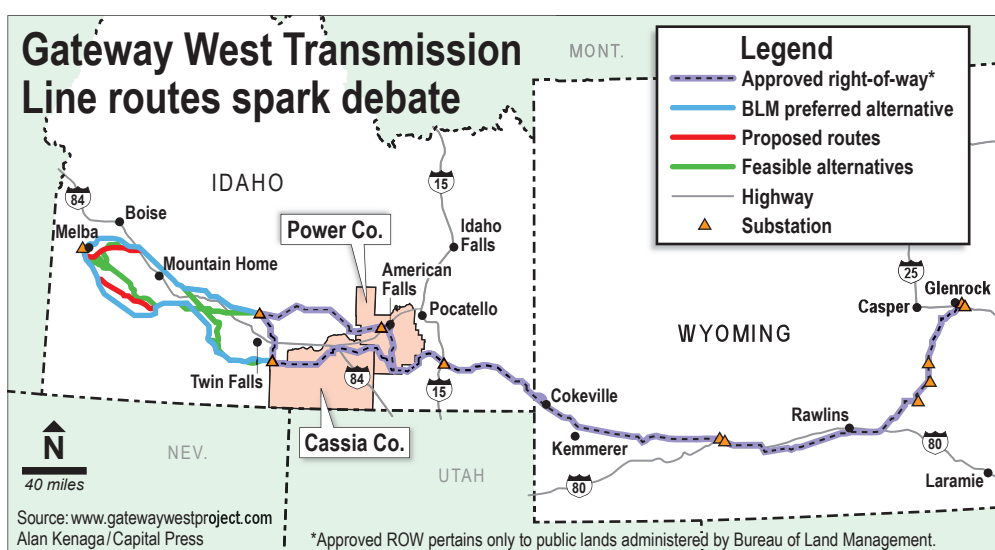
By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — A Hailey, Idaho-based environmental organization has appealed the Bureau of Land Management's approval of a high-voltage transmission line route through sage grouse habitat on public land and requested a halt of the start of construction.

The Gateway West Transmission Line was jointly proposed by Rocky Mountain Power and Idaho Power and would span more than 1,000 miles from Glenrock, Wyo., to Melba, Idaho, including 850 miles of 500-kilovolt line.

Officials of Western Watersheds say the route they prefer, BLM's Alternative 1, would have less impact on the embattled native bird and is also the preferred route of the power companies.

However, BLM officials



note Alternative 1 would also cross through 50.5 miles of agricultural and private land, mostly in Gooding County, compared to 32.7 miles under the agency's approved route, called Alternative 5.

Farmers have fought different segments of the line passing through Power and Cassia

counties. Their attorney, however, has suggested a route that would minimize disturbance on private lands. In November 2013, BLM approved a record of decision for eight of 10 sections of its preferred route, including the segments contested by farmers.

A record of decision on the

remaining two segments was approved Jan. 20, having been delayed to review impacts on the Morley Nelson Birds of Prey National Conservation Area in Western Idaho. An appeals period on that decision ended Feb. 24. BLM spokeswoman Heather Feeney said a few other appeals were also

filed, and all will be considered by the Interior Board of Land Appeals.

Feeney said BLM's approved option avoids priority sage grouse habitat under the agency's recently revised land-use plan. Erik Molvar, executive director of Western Watersheds, believes the habitat classifications are based more on politics than science.

"The idea that what you have is less critical habitat is a fiction," Molvar said. "To us it makes no sense to re-route this transmission line all the way south to head into sensitive sage grouse habitat."

Molvar also questions the need for the line. Mark Stokes, engineering project leader with Idaho Power, said the line will help the power companies transmit solar and wind power that it's federally obligated to buy. He said solar and wind power are highly variable and must be transmitted to where it's most needed or can be sold.

Stokes said the companies are now working with local officials and landowners, and construction won't start until sometime between 2019 and 2024.

Doug Balfour, the farmers' attorney, believes Western Watersheds' appeal may help "delay the project again."

"Nothing is going to happen quickly," Balfour said. "Maybe it will inspire BLM to suddenly talk with us."

Balfour said Idaho law grants siting authority for power lines to counties, and county commissioners support his growers' cause, which could leave the line "dead-ended" on the federal land.

Stokes said the power companies will work diligently with landowners, but ultimately, they have the option of approaching the Public Utilities Commission to pursue condemnation.

"We haven't done that in decades," Stokes said.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Gov. Butch Otter, right, presents an award for excellence in agriculture to Steve Wilder on Feb. 21 during the annual Larry Branan Idaho Ag Summit. Four other people also received governor's awards during the event.

Five Idahoans receive awards for excellence in ag

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Five people involved in Idaho's farming industry have received governor's awards for excellence in agriculture.

"On behalf of a grateful state, thank you for the work you do all day long," Gov. Butch Otter, a rancher and farmer, told the recipients Feb. 21 during the Larry Branan Idaho Ag Summit.

The recipients join almost 80 other people or businesses that have received the awards.

"The list reads like a who's who in Idaho agriculture," Idaho Ag Summit Executive Director Rick Waitley told Capital Press in an email.

"Idaho agriculture is rich with great leaders who have built, maintained and have a vision for the future of our industry," he said. "You would like to give 20 awards a year but that is what makes the recognition special — five and only five (receive the awards each year)."

A lifetime achievement award was presented to Doug Gross, whose award write-up called him "one of the most innovative and successful potato producers in the state."

Gross owns a 1,500-acre diversified farm in southwestern Idaho and is often asked to be a spokesman on Idaho potato issues.

"Doug has been the example that many have looked to for successful operation techniques and strategies," his write-up states.

R. Garth Sasser, who received a degree in dairy science from the University of Idaho, received an award for technical innovation.

After a 32-year faculty career at the University of Idaho, Sasser and his wife, Nancy, started a business, BioTracking Inc., that is based on a blood protein associated with

pregnancy that he discovered during his research.

"The significance of finding, identifying and commercializing the blood protein for these test kits is that every competing company in the world that tests for pregnancy uses the ... class of proteins that Dr. Sasser discovered," his write-up states.

Brothers Doug and Art McIntosh, fifth-generation farmers from Northern Idaho, received an award for marketing innovation.

According to their write-up, the two have tried to take advantage of current consumer trends, diversify their operation and add value to their agriculture production.

They joined Idaho Preferred to take advantage of that state branding program for their organic products. They sell their wheat berries, flour and organic oats directly to consumers.

Sid Cellan, who owns and operates a 2,100-acre dryland farm near Soda Springs, received an award for environmental stewardship.

"While Sid is viewed by his neighbors as an excellent farmer and one who raises quality crops, he is also respected in the region and has set a standard for improving and sustaining wildlife habitat for everyone to enjoy," his write-up states.

Steve Wilder, an FFA instructor at Meridian High School, received an award for education advocacy.

During his 36-year teaching career, he "has positively influenced several thousand students involved in the Meridian Agriculture, Science and Technology Program," his award write-up states.

Wilder was also a key player in convincing lawmakers to pass the 2015 Agricultural Education Initiative, which provided about \$2 million more a year for secondary ag education in Idaho.

Amalgamated Sugar suffers 'phishing' breach

Capital Press

NAMPA, Idaho — Officials of Amalgamated Sugar Co. say a computer security breach led to the release of the personal information of many of its employees.

The breach resulted from a so-called "spear phishing" email. The hacker sent an email posing as Amalgamated President and CEO John McCreedy requesting copies of the employee data from a corporate employee, according to a Feb. 22 press release.

Amalgamated officials said they learned of the breach within hours and notified local law enforcement, the office of the Idaho attorney general, the State Tax Commission, the FBI and the IRS. Letters have been sent to affected employees. Amalgamated will cover the costs of credit monitoring



Courtesy of Amalgamated Sugar

Computer "phishers" have stolen personal data about Amalgamated Sugar Co. employees.

and identity theft protection services through Lifelock for them.

There's been no indication

that the culprits have sought to use any of the data, according to the press release.

McCreedy said the com-

pany is examining its protocols and implementing measures to prevent a future breach.

Labrador: Idaho should be ag innovation capital

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho can and should be the nation's leader in agricultural technology and innovation, U.S. Rep. Raul Labrador says.

With a wealth of experience and leaders in many areas of agriculture, the state has an opportunity to lead the way in ag technology and modernization, the Idaho Republican said Feb. 22.

"We should be the capital for agricultural modernization and innovation in the whole United States," Labrador said during a Food Producers of Idaho meeting. "We need to figure out, How do we become the pioneer for the new technology in agriculture?"

FPI's membership includes most of the state's main farm and livestock organizations and agribusinesses. Labrador spoke to FPI before heading to the state Capitol to address the House of Representatives.

He told FPI members that while he is not a farmer and didn't grow up aground agri-



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

U.S. Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, left, speaks with Food Producers of Idaho members Feb. 22 in Boise. He said the state has the farm-related assets in place to become the national leader in agricultural technology and innovation.

culture, he has hired people such as Brad Griff who have. Griff handles agriculture issues for the congressman.

"He grew up doing the stuff that you guys are dealing with," said Labrador, who encouraged FPI members and others to contact Griff about any farming-related issues.

He also spoke about the immigration issue and said that border security needs to be addressed first because until that happens, everything else will be obscured by the politics of the issue.

He said the nation needs an immigration system that

Labrador also commended President Donald Trump for the selection of Neil Gorsuch to fill the vacant U.S. Supreme Court seat.

He said he believes Gorsuch is someone who will protect the U.S. Constitution and decide cases based on the rule of law.

"That will make a difference for your industry more than any policy that will come out of the White House or Congress," Labrador said.

Labrador said he has a good relationship with Trump and noted that the president is pretty much doing exactly what he said he would do during his election campaign.

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