

WAFLA calls for suspension of state pay survey

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Washington State Employment Security Department should suspend its annual agricultural survey of wages and practices until it addresses apparent inconsistencies, the director of a farm labor organization says.

The surveys are used to help set minimum wages for foreign guestworkers,

Dan Fazio, director of the farm labor organization WAFLA, sent a letter to ESD Commissioner Dale Peinecke on May 5 requesting suspension of the survey and asking for a meeting with Peinecke and the state Department of Agriculture.

Fazio said WAFLA hired



Dan Wheat/Capital Press File
Dan Fazio, director of WAFLA, on Feb. 23.

EcoNorthwest, an economic research company, to look at the surveys. It concluded ESD's 2015 "survey numbers make no sense and aren't usable" for analysis.

"For example, ESD reported 128,869 apple workers in 2015 which was larger than the total average agriculture workforce in Washington that year," EcoNorthwest wrote.

In his letter, Fazio said he's concerned about an ESD survey used by the U.S. Department of Labor to help set minimum piece rates for H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers.

WAFLA has submitted a public records request for data from that survey, the letter states.

Gustavo Aviles, an ESD manager, said he does not think the 2015 survey is flawed, that he will double check the survey, wants to know where Fazio got his

numbers and is working on a response to Fazio's letter.

Worker surveys begin in late June and employer surveys begin in late August or early September, said Zoe Zardworn, an economic analyst working with Aviles.

"I would like to hear what they have to say. Perhaps they will say that the figures are different because they changed methodologies. We all agree we need good data. Let's start from there," Fazio told Capital Press.

In his letter, he said there is no reason for ESD to do a piece rate survey separate from an hourly wage survey.

Piece rate is "extremely difficult to survey because it is dynamic, subject to many changes based on (fruit) vari-

ety, picking conditions, time of year and a host of other variables," he wrote.

Federal guidelines require receipt of completed surveys from employers of at least 15 percent of the workers in the crop or variety being surveyed, he said, adding he doubts ESD surveyed employers of 15 percent of 128,869 workers.

ESD's 2016 report estimated 12 Braeburn apple growers in the state, a drop from 49 the year before, Fazio wrote in the letter.

Industry representatives call the Braeburn grower number "nonsensical," he wrote, adding that there are far more than 12 Braeburn growers in the state.

The estimate may be based

on numbers of growers who responded to the survey, which is problematic since fewer growers responded in 2016 after ESD gave the names of respondents, given in confidence in 2015, to the state attorney general, Fazio wrote.

The attorney general investigated ESD's claim that WAFLA biased the 2015 survey by warning growers that choosing piece rate over hourly wage reporting could artificially inflate prevailing wages for the next season.

WAFLA complied with a request for information from the attorney general but a judge ruled a second request from the attorney general an invasion of privacy and unconstitutional.



Courtesy Marion County Dairy Women

Donata Doornbal is the 2017 Marion County Dairy Princess/Ambassador. 2017 Oregon Dairy Princess/Ambassador Kiara Single crowned her May 2 at the Red Lion Hotel in Salem, Ore.

Marion County's new Dairy Princess Ambassador crowned

SALEM, Ore. — Donata Doornbal was crowned the 2017 Marion County Dairy Princess Ambassador May 2 at the Red Lion Hotel in Salem.

She is the daughter of Joe and Astrid Doornbal of Scio, Ore. She was raised on her family's 200-cow organic dairy farm, where she attained her high school diploma as a home school student.

Currently, Donata works as a tax preparer in Salem. In her time off she enjoys working on the dairy, feeding calves and mowing pastures, among other chores, according to a news release.

She plans to attend Chemeketa Community College to further her education in foreign language and business accounting. Donata is also a member of the Salem Youth Symphony, playing the violin, and is active in the music group at Immanuel Reformed Church.

At the event, Donata gave an entertaining speech titled "No Farms. No Food!" She then presented a TV commercial about cheese and an-

swered an impromptu question.

The 2017 Oregon Dairy Princess Ambassador, Kiara Single, presented her with the tiara that she will wear as she represents Marion County dairy farm families and promotes dairy products. In addition, she will compete to become the 2018 Oregon dairy princess ambassador in January.

Donata will receive scholarships from Marion County Dairy Women, Woodburn Livestock Exchange, Cascade Dairy Service, VandeBurgt & Co., Ernst Irrigation, Buchanan Cellars-Valley Feed, Ag West Supply, All West-Select Sires, CHS Nutrition, Purina Nutrition and Oak Lea Mixers.

Emma Coleman, of St. Paul, the 2016 Marion County Dairy Princess Ambassador, received the \$2,500 college scholarship given by Marion County Dairy Women. She is a freshman at Cal Poly.

To schedule an activity with Donata, contact her advisor, Jessie DeJager, at 503-588-9092.

Ag Fest sets record, honors ag education award winners

By JAN JACKSON
For the Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — A record-breaking crowd attended the 30th annual Ag Fest April 29-30 at the Oregon State Fairgrounds.

Tami Kerr, executive director of Oregon Dairy Farmers Association and 2017 Ag Fest chair, was enthusiastic about the record-breaking results of this year's event.

"It was a record-breaking year in every way," Kerr said. "The trade show filled faster this year than ever before, we had more local food producers selling cheese, salsa, pies and meat ... new cooking demonstrations from Bob's Red Mill and there were more hands-on experiences than ever in both Ag Country and the animal barns."

When she first joined the board 17 years ago, the event drew 7,000 to 8,000 attendees.

"This year," Kerr said, "we nearly hit 22,000 — 21,964 to be exact. No other state that I know of has a premier agriculture education event that matches this one, and it is a thrill to see entire families learning together about where their food comes from."

Part of the event was the presentation of the Oregon Ag Fest Agricultural Education Awards. Top award winners were members of the Echo, Ore., FFA, the Henley FFA near Klamath Falls and the Oregon Dairy Women.



Jan Jackson/For the Capital Press

Petting an eight-week-old Nigerian Dwarf goat was among the many popular attractions at the 30th Annual Ag Fest held at the Salem Fairgrounds April 29-30. A record-breaking 21,964 adults and children attended this year's event.

To extend their mission beyond the annual two-day event, Ag Fest organizers decided to award student organizations, nonprofit groups and others who promote agriculture and educate Oregonians about it.

Echo FFA members — Echo is a small town 8 miles south of Hermiston in Eastern Oregon — took home the first-place prize of \$1,000 for their 2,333 "agricultural learning moments" they advocated between January 2016 and March 2017.

Those projects included presenting Ag in the Classroom lessons to elementary classrooms in the Echo School District, hosting a petting zoo

for elementary- through high school-age students, teaching a lesson at Rocky Heights Elementary School in Hermiston and taking part in work stations at the Eastern Oregon Agriculture Field Day at the Sustainable Agriculture and Energy Center in Boardman.

The 10 Echo FFA members who attended Ag Fest to accept their award also spent the morning assisting with pedal tractor races, parking cars and the Ag Challenge scavenger hunt.

Henley FFA took home the second-place prize of \$600 for working with the local Klamath Falls Farm Expo, hosting an Ag Field Day for students at a local elementary school,

participating in the Oregon Ag in the Classroom Spring Literacy Project, as well as other community service efforts that included working with PLAY — Promoting Lifelong Activities for Youth — and the Klamath County Forestry Tour.

Accepting the \$400 prize for third place was 2017 State Dairy Princess Ambassador Kiara Single and Jessica Kliewer, state director of the Dairy Princess Ambassador Program for the Oregon Dairy Women. Since 1959, the volunteer organization has been telling dairy's story to the public through the princess ambassador program and other efforts.

H-2A progress, appointment raise hopes for ag, reps say

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

The Trump administration is processing H-2A-visa applications faster than the Obama administration did last year, and recent comments and appointments are giving agricultural labor organizations hope for more gains.

President Donald Trump is firmly committed to helping agriculture thrive, Ray Starling, a member of the president's Council of Economic Advisers, told a group of agricultural journalists in Washington, D.C., on April 24. He also spoke recently at the National Press Club.

Trump is fully aware agriculture needs trade agreements and labor and will be looking

carefully at how to improve or expand the H-2A-visa program for foreign guestworkers, Starling said.

"We are very heartened by that. Ray is former chief counsel to Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina and has a good grasp of labor intensive ag issues," Frank Gasparini Jr., executive vice president of the National Council for Agricultural Employers, told Capital Press.

The appointment of Kristi Boswell, director of congressional relations at the American Farm Bureau Federation, as senior adviser to Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, is also "very positive" for labor-intensive agriculture, Gasparini said.

"She knows the issue backward and forward," Dan Fazio, director of WAFLA, formerly

the Washington Farm Labor Association, said of Boswell. He called her appointment and Starling's comments "very positive."

"Everything we see out of the Trump administration on labor-intensive agriculture is very positive. The only thing we've been hampered by is getting Trump's policy hires ramped up because of the toxic environment (in Congress)," Fazio said.

He said he's hopeful small policy gains on H-2A can occur in the next three to six months, including allowing USDA-funded housing to be used for H-2A workers. A 70-bed facility in Granger, Wash., can't be used for H-2A now because of the policy regarding USDA funding, he said.

Changes to policy and interpretation of regulations can be done relatively quickly, but changes to regulations take longer, Gasparini said.

Regulatory changes to H-2A could occur later, he said.

Nothing will happen in time to help H-2A this year except faster processing of applications by the State and Labor departments, and that seems to be happening, Gasparini said.

U.S. Customs and Immigration Services, which caused the most delays last year by "sitting on contracts," seems to be better this year but is struggling to keep up with demand, Fazio said. USCIS still needs to streamline the process but it works as long as WAFLA allows 75 days for processing, he said.

Idaho dryland farm raises, grazes cover crops

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — Mike McNabb and his family are experimenting to see if a system to improve soil health by mimicking nature can work in their arid region.

As in nature, their farm avoids soil disturbance, thereby maintaining proper soil structure to support beneficial organisms. They were among the first in the region to try no-till farming in the late 1970s.

Since the fall of 2014, they've also sought to keep living roots in their fields, using a diverse mixture of water-efficient plants raised for soil-health benefits, called cover crops. Cattle "mob graze" their cover crops, confined by electric fencing in small paddocks and moved frequently to mimic movements of historic bison herds.

Cover crops are in vogue on Idaho's irrigated farms, where they're often tilled into soil to decompose as "green

manure." Most Southern Idaho dryland farmers, however, have shied away from cover crops, worried raising plants they don't intend to harvest would unnecessarily deplete soil moisture.

"We're not as concerned about that because there's enough other benefits that outweigh that," McNabb said, noting he's "still in the trial phase" with grazing cover crops, but believes healthier soils should ultimately retain more water.

McNabb said cattle provide

a fertilizer benefit without the need to incorporate cover crops into soil with tillage, as they evenly recirculate nutrients in their manure. He also benefits from the forage value of cover crops. On one 30-acre dryland plot, McNabb produced about 120 animal unit months of forage. Each AUM — the forage needed to sustain a cow-calf pair for a month — is worth roughly \$25.

His cover crops also keep pests and diseases that thrive in monocultures at bay in his

wheat and alfalfa rotation.

This spring, the McNabbs will plant 350 acres to cover crops, which they'll graze in a couple of months, before terminating the cover crops with glyphosate herbicide and direct-seeding fall wheat. They also have 80 acres of fall cover crops, which they'll graze in June. They'll replant 50 acres in a warm-season cover crop blend, using irrigation, to graze again in the fall.

McNabb said he's likely reached the ceiling for his cov-

er crop acreage and was motivated by low wheat prices to try the experiment.

"If a weed comes back up, there's a good chance we'll put more wheat in again, but I'd love it if we find a niche and it works out because it lowers our fertilizer and chemical usage and feeds the soil better," McNabb said.

The McNabbs obtained financial assistance for their experiments from USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.