

Editorials are written by or approved by members of the Capital Press Editorial Board.

All other commentary pieces are the opinions of the authors but not necessarily this newspaper.

Opinion

Editorial Board

Editor & Publisher
Joe Beach

Managing Editor
Carl Sampson

opinions@capitalpress.com Online: www.capitalpress.com/opinion

OUR VIEW

New organic rule about science or ideology?

The Department of Agriculture has announced it is delaying for six months the effective date of the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices final rule and reopening it to comments, reigniting a debate over what it should include, and the essence of what it means to be organic.

Is it about science, or is it about ideology?

The rule amends the organic livestock and poultry production requirements by adding new provisions for avian living conditions and livestock handling and transport for slaughter. It also expands and clarifies existing requirements for livestock care and production practices and

mammalian living conditions.

According to proponents, the rule seeks to align organic livestock, poultry and egg production practices with consumer “expectations.” That seems a bit subjective as a standard. What do consumers expect? And aren’t those expectations subject to change without much notice?

Though never stated, a secondary purpose of the rule seems to be to limit the size of organic livestock and poultry operations by increasing the amount of outdoor space

required. The more outdoor space required, the less any given farm can produce.

A happy byproduct of the rule would be to limit supply and maintain the premium for organic products.

The target, we suspect, are the large so-called “factory farms” producing under the current organic standards.

Those farms produce commercial quantities at an economy of scale smaller operations are unable to match.

For purists, those farms — even if they follow the letter of the law — are anathema to their idea of

organic production.

While we respect the sentiment, we’ve always believed the rules should be both secular and scale neutral. The proposed rule is at least half that. The rule is bad for bigger farms, good for smaller producers who benefit from a relative scarcity of the product in question.

The USDA takes a more optimistic view: “The new detailed standards for the non-ruminant (poultry and swine) sectors will support the continued growth of organic poultry, eggs, and pork in particular.”

We’re not so sure the rule will do anything to increase the amount of product available to consumers. It will ensure that the economies

of scale will be limited, and the definition of “large” will be altered.

The Organic Trade Association, which represents 350 producers, supports the rule. We agree with it when it says there’s nothing new that will be learned in the extended comment period. There are no new arguments to be made.

“Any additional comment period,” it says, “will only serve to demonstrate that the organic industry and consumer want the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices rule to become effective, in its entirety.”

If that’s the case, the rule as written will be adopted. Giving USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue a little time to digest what has already been said won’t hurt.



OUR VIEW



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

The 8,000-acre Murtha Ranch along the John Day River near Condon, Ore., was purchased by the Western Rivers Conservancy for \$7.9 million. The group sold it for the same price to the Oregon State Parks Department, which developed it into Cottonwood Canyon State Park. As a nod to traditional uses, hunting and fishing is allowed, and state officials are developing a grazing plan that may be put into effect next spring.

Land sales have big impact on ag economy

There’s more to an agricultural land sale than a willing buyer and a willing seller.

A farm or ranch changing hands can impact neighbors and the local economy almost as much as the parties directly involved.

That’s why when ag land goes up for sale it’s a big deal — far more important than just dollars and cents.

Last week, reporter Eric Mortenson took a look at the sale of agricultural land across Oregon. What he found was the price of exclusive farm use land — a designation used by the state to identify the best ag land — has skyrocketed in recent years as it changed hands. Some remained orchards, vineyards, farms or ranchland, but other tracts were taken out of production for a variety of purposes including conservation, recreation and even a state park.

In each case, the sale can have a profound impact. Some examples:

- Neighboring farmers and ranchers see the price of expansion increasing, potentially beyond their means. At the same time, the comparable value of their land continues to grow, impacting their finances.

- The area where the state purchased ranchland for conversion to a state park has seen mixed impacts. Neighbors have seen the pool of grazing land shrink, but nearby towns have seen the number of visitors increase.

Overall, the biggest impact is when land is taken out of production.

Because agricultural land is more than real estate, buyers and sellers need to take the local economy into account.

For example, taking vast swaths of ranchland out of production will impact other ranchers and their ability to graze livestock. If livestock is no

longer raised, that will impact the economy. Equipment will no longer be bought or serviced in nearby towns. Seed and fertilizer dealers will see the number of customers shrink. Cattle will no longer go to market, impacting livestock auctions.

Considering that the average age of farmers across the West is about 60, what happens when agricultural land changes hands takes on added importance.

Whether land stays in the family or is sold to absentee landowners, how it is used profoundly impacts the region.

Overall, the best case scenario is the land will remain in agriculture, supporting ranchers, farmers and the economy.

Whether, or how, that can be mandated will remain a continuing debate across the West.

More agricultural research funding needed

By THOMAS GRUMBLY
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Thomas Grumbly



It’s the midpoint of the avian flu season, but poultry farmers in the U.S. are starting to sigh with relief.

After worrisome strains of flu were found in chicken flocks in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia and Kentucky — the heart of our country’s “broiler belt” — no more infected birds have been found and warnings are beginning to lift.

The last large-scale outbreak of avian flu occurred in 2015. Efforts to control an avian flu outbreak in the U.S. included the culling of 48 million birds, flock by flock, when just one bird or two on a farm became ill.

Most of the carcasses had to be burned to facilitate disposal. While that outbreak fortunately did not sicken any people, the economic impact totaled \$1.2 billion.

A growing number of wheat farmers are starting to worry instead. Wheat blast, a hard-to-control fungus that has decimated crops in South America for the past few decades, is now emerging in South Asia.

Earlier this year, farmers in eastern India and Bangladesh burned tens of thousands of hectares of wheat plantings after the crops became infected.

The fungus has not yet impacted crops here in the U.S. But for those studying the fungus, the question is not if it will strike, but when.

Funding shrinks

Scientists have yet to figure out how to breed wheat varieties resistant to this fungus, and they have yet to figure out how to detect the fungus before it shrivels the grain. As wheat blast is spread by seeds and crop residue, the only option left is to burn the fields where the fungus is suspected.

Everyone — farmers and scientists alike — understands that burning up livestock and farmland is not a long-term solution to the diseases afflicting agriculture.

But for many problems, long-term solutions have not been found. What’s worse is that the search for solutions has ceased to be a priority for our government.

In 1940, almost 40 percent of the federal government’s research budget was devoted to the agricultural sciences.

By the early 1970s, the percentage was not even 6.5 percent. In 2014, it was 3.4 percent.

You can see the funding issues quite clearly with the Agriculture Department’s flagship program for competitively awarded grants, the Agriculture and Food

Research Initiative. AFRI was created by Congress almost 10 years ago and its budget was authorized at \$700 million. In the midst of talk about budget cuts and limited spending, Congress agreed to increase the program’s scope by \$25 million — yet its current funding still sits at only \$375 million.

Loss of imagination

With such limited funding, AFRI’s program administrators have tried to spread its focus broadly, looking to touch as many fields as possible. Such a broad focus makes it hard for narrow fields of research to earn consistent funding.

Barbara Valent of Kansas State University, for example, is one of the leading researchers on the blast fungus in the world.

She has received two AFRI grants that have helped her understand how rice varieties resist the disease, but she and others in her field are still determining the key to blast resistance in wheat.

Even though her current AFRI grant expires at the end of 2017, she has been unable to apply for another grant since the program has not focused recently on a field of inquiry that includes the blast fungus.

In many ways, the agricultural sciences suffer from a disease of lack of the public imagination. People do not generally dream of feeding the world in the same way that we dream of curing cancer or putting an astronaut on Mars.

But even the most outrageous dreamer cannot picture an end to world hunger when farmers are left with no other way to stop mysterious pathogens than by burning down their farms.

It is time to put out these fires and fight off diseases with cold hard science. With the federal budget season upon us, funding agricultural research has got to be a priority for this year’s budget as well as for the next farm bill.

Our dreams for the future — like our food supply — have to stop going up in smoke.

Thomas Grumbly is president of Supporters of Agricultural Research Foundation. He has held senior policy roles in the Office of Management and Budget, the Agriculture Department and the Food and Drug Administration. This first appeared in the American Farm Bureau’s “Focus on Agriculture.”

Readers’ views

Snake River dams: Sky is not falling

The April 14, 2017, Capital Press had a front page banner headline “\$1 Billion Question. The lead article claimed the state of Oregon proposes to reintroduce endangered salmon and steelhead above Idaho Power Company’s Hells Canyon Dam on the middle Snake River. Idaho Power Company and various irrigation representatives were reported as claiming this could cost Idaho water users a billion or more dollars.

A follow-up editorial in the April 20 edition of the Press repeated those claims and called

Oregon’s proposal “cock-eyed” and questioned Oregon’s “obsession with fish.”

There is one small problem. Those claims are false. As in not true. Moreover, the people making them know they are not true. It is a matter of record.

Oregon has not proposed and does not intend to reintroduce salmon and steelhead that are on the list of endangered species. False claims to the contrary are simply designed to scare people and dupe decision makers.

Idaho Power gambled on a highly controversial fish passage plan when it built the dams that blocked a vast area of salmon and steelhead

habitat. As predicted, the plan failed with disastrous economic and ecological consequences extending hundreds of miles downstream and thousands of miles along the Pacific Coast.

The Hells Canyon Complex of dams is undergoing relicensing. As token mitigation for the ongoing damage, Oregon proposed to restore salmon and steelhead in a few small streams that enter the project reservoirs. The fish used will not be on or be eligible to be put on the list of endangered species.

Oregon 401 Water Quality Certification would require Idaho Power Company to evaluate and recommend fish stocks for

the reintroduction program for Oregon approval. See ODEQ 401 Cert, section IX.E <http://www.deq.state.or.us/wq/sec-401cert/docs/hcwqcert.pdf>.

The sky is not falling. Idaho Power, Idaho Water User’s Association, Boise Valley and Owyhee Reservoir water users, Idaho’s Committee of Nine, Idaho Irrigation Pumpers Association, and Idaho Groundwater Association named in the article should be ashamed of themselves for claiming otherwise.

*Ed Chaney
Executive Director
Northwest Resource
Information Center
Eagle, Idaho*