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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Agriculture copes with a growing labor shortage

“Labor is the No. 1 issue in agriculture.”

Ask a farmer, orchardist, nursery or dairy operator, packer or processor — anyone who hires full-time or seasonal farmworkers, and most will tell you they are worried about labor.

For them, labor is the make-or-break factor of this year — and every other year, for that matter. The supply of labor is one of the many factors they do not control. Even in areas where the labor pool has remained steady the need for farmworkers has continued to grow as production increases.

For decades the farm labor supply has depended on an array of factors, including federal immigration policy and enforcement. Over the years, many farmworkers have arrived in the U.S. illegally. Whether that happened 20 years ago or last week, it means that getting a job legally in the U.S. is problematic. Many farmers are forced to accept workers’ documentation with the realization that it may



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Workers in Spanish Castle Vineyard south of Rock Island, Wash., on May 17. Members of Congress seem about as eager to reform immigration laws as they are to lick an electric fence.

not be valid.

That puts farmers between the proverbial rock and a hard place. They need to get their crops harvested and packed, but they are on the hook if an employee does not have adequate documentation.

Without legal status, those workers are in limbo. It is up to Congress to come up with a way

to do that, but members of that august body seem about as eager to fix the system as they are to lick an electric fence. Doing that will take political courage, which appears to be an oxymoron these days in the U.S. Capitol.

But the unemployment rate appears to be the primary driver that farmers don’t control. When the unemployment rate is low,

as it is now across the West, the pool of farmworkers is smaller because other jobs are available that pay better, offer benefits and are more stable. This is not a matter of immigration policy so much as economics.

The saving grace for agriculture has been the H-2A guestworker program. It provides a temporary visa to foreign workers. Farmers pay for round-trip transportation between the workers’ home country and the farm, housing and good pay. When the job is over they return to their homes.

This year Washington farmers will bring in 15,000 guestworkers from Mexico and other countries, and California will bring in 11,000. Farmers in other states also depend on H-2A workers.

The downside of the H-2A program: It is limited to temporary workers. Some sectors of agriculture, such as dairy farms and processing plants, need full-time, year-round employees.

Under the Trump administration, the H-2A program seems to be working

better than under the previous administration, which seemed bent on slowing down the paperwork and causing as much consternation as possible.

Mechanization and automation represent another bright spot for some farmers. They are buying picking platforms to increase the speed and efficiency of tree fruit harvests, many dairies have installed robotic milkers that reduce the need for labor, berry and grape growers use mechanical harvesters and researchers continue to work on robotic harvesters for nearly every other crop.

The labor predicament leaves farmers and others with three options: Wait for the economy to slow down so unemployment increases, wait for Congress to get cracking on immigration reform, or the administration and Congress can further streamline the H-2A program so farmers can obtain more guestworkers in a timely and affordable manner.

None of the three developments seems particularly likely any time soon.

Colin Murphey Photo
Part of a plan to bring water from the Columbia River to irrigation districts in northeast Oregon is at risk after a lawsuit prompted one district to pull out.



Keep eye on the goal in NE Oregon water effort

No one is pleased that the Westland Irrigation District pulled out of the Central Project plan, one of three proposals to bring Columbia River water to the region.

The district’s board unanimously voted to pull out while it defends itself against a \$2.9 million lawsuit brought by farmers who say they are protecting their senior water rights.

While it is a setback, it should not be the end of the decades-long effort to bring Columbia River water to one of the driest regions of Oregon.

J.R. Cook, director of the Northeast Oregon Water Association, which would administer the projects, said something to our colleagues on the East Oregonian editorial board that he never thought he’d say: The organization has water and nowhere to go with it.

For years, farmers, developers and political representatives throughout the basin have pleaded: Just let us access some water out of the Columbia River, and we’ll create a fantastic return on that investment.

We’ll grow more and hire more, pay more in property and business taxes, create growth in supportive industries. We’ll benefit ourselves and the entire region.

But here they are, water all but in hand, and the window is closing. They have until April 2019 to spend \$11 million in state funding to provide Columbia River water to the region.

For farmers, the stakes are enormous. The value of farmland in the Columbia Basin — and the crops grown on it — increases with irrigation. Dryland wheat may yield around \$100 per acre. Add 1 acre-foot of water and the value increases to \$500 per acre; add 3 acre-feet, and the value increases to \$5,000 per acre.

Environmentalists are satisfied with the plan, and over a long period of winning over one vote at a time, a majority in the Legislature gave the basin money to help fund the projects.

The future is in the hands of the region’s farmers. A single lawsuit, disputing the application of water rights in the

district, cannot be allowed to be the project’s undoing.

There is risk, of course, in any enterprise. Nothing in water or entrepreneurship is guaranteed. It will take a spirit of cooperation, of optimism and the desire to see improvement and change.

It will take a lot more work and a recognition that relying on the Umatilla River and McKay Reservoir for irrigation will only get worse, and that drawing down underground water reserves — a finite resource — puts future sustainability at risk.

We hope for the sake of the region that the spirit of cooperation can be resurrected to salvage some or all of the effort.

Patience, and a steady hand, are needed while the lawsuit is addressed. The judge in the case has even suggested the parties enter mediation as an alternative to litigating the issue.

In the meantime, NOWA and its supporters need to keep their eye on the goal of bringing Columbia River water to the region.

Washington’s double standard on rail

By JOHN STUHMILLER
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
John Stuhmiller



Perceptions of railroads appear to be relative to where you live these days.

If you live in the big city, trains that whisk you from one urban center to the next are “state-of-the-art,” but if you live in rural areas, where trains are used to move commodities, they pose a cancer threat.

At least that’s what the state of Washington is telling us.

On May 21, the Washington State Department of Transportation rolled out its new Charger locomotives for passenger rail service along the I-5 corridor. As WSDOT notes on its website for the official unveiling event, the new 4,400-horsepower Cummins QSK95 engines are “next generation rail equipment” that will “feature improved fuel efficiency and safety upgrades” and, most importantly, will “meet new, stringent emission standards.” The WSDOT hosted a PR event to mark the launch of its new train, complete with “commemorative giveaways,” formal remarks by dignitaries and a toast to christen the new train.

This is pretty remarkable, given that just a month earlier, the state Department of Ecology sent a very different message about trains when it issued its final environmental impact statement (FEIS) on the Millennium Bulk Terminals project. In its findings, the agency claimed that trains serving Millennium would increase the potential cancer risk for members of a Longview neighborhood.

Same locomotives

So what kind of engines will be used for the Millennium project?

The same 4,400-horsepower locomotive engines with the same emissions profile as those used in Seattle.

Clearly double standards abound on this. Let’s start with the cancer allegations. Why would the same trains used in Seattle increase cancer risks when used in Longview?

The answer likely has to do with what’s being hauled. Because the Longview trains will haul coal, they apparently came under sharper scrutiny than, say, a train carrying people around Seattle. This is a political battle, pure and simple. It’s worth noting that after five years in the review

process, this issue was never raised until April’s FEIS document was released. No public reviews, no public hearings. In fact the agency failed to account for the use of idle control technology used by the railroads, or that the carrier, BNSF, is using the cleanest, most efficient fleet in North America.

This begs the question: Would Ecology have advanced a similar finding for Sound Transit permitting, a grain terminal or other commodities? What about all of the other trains that run through the Puget Sound region on a daily basis — including the new Charger, launched with a state-funded celebration?

Playing favorites

In the case of Millennium, we’re seeing an agency that has chosen to play favorites with commodities. This sets a dangerous precedent for any industry, but especially agriculture, which just happens to be our state’s second largest sector, right behind aerospace. Will our products be subject to such scrutiny for new projects? What about GMOs? Or fertilizers? Or airplanes?

The fact is, trains are the safest, most efficient means of moving anything on land, period. Freight trains effectively take the equivalent of 280 trucks off the highway, which saves four times the fuel and reduces emissions and highway traffic congestion.

Trains are also the safest means of moving people from one place to another on land. The WSDOT says so on its website: “Passenger rail service is an efficient and environmentally sound travel mode and these locomotives will pull Washington state-sponsored Amtrak Cascades trains.”

Villifying rail because the commodity it carries — under requirement of federal law — has no place in the permitting process and sets a dangerous precedent for our state. We can and must do better, or risk jeopardizing our entire trade-based economy.

John Stuhmiller is the CEO of the Washington Farm Bureau.