

House ag chairman outlines farm bill priorities

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Michael Conaway says he plans to have a farm bill ready in January or February but to expect individual pieces of farm legislation in stand-alone bills before that.

Those stand-alone pieces will test lawmaker sentiment, and the plan is to roll them into the farm bill, he said in a media phone conference.

Top priorities are creating a safety net for cotton growers, fixing the Margin Protection Program for dairy farmers and the Agricultural Risk Coverage program for grain growers and finding money for a vaccine bank for foot and mouth disease.

Most of the farm bill deliberations will be more of a fine-tuning than a shift in focus, but it will be in an environment of limited resources, the Texas Republican said.

The 2014 Farm Bill was supposed to spend \$23 billion less than the 2008 Farm bill, but it's looking more like it's going to be \$100 billion less, he said.

"I'm not necessarily going to be able to reclaim all those (dollars), so we've got some hard decisions to make. And it's going to require the Wisdom of Solomon to make some of them," he said.

Everyone is arguing, justifying and making the case for why their program should have more money than what was in the 2014 Farm Bill, he said.

"If there is a shift in focus, it is to focus like a laser on SNAP," he said.

Reform — not food-stamp cuts — to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program has been the focus of more than 30 listening sessions, he said.

The aim is to get the policy correct, reset the success metric and address the "moral hazards baked into" the program.

The focus is not on what is spent but giving people the help they need and getting them back on their feet to where they no longer need the program, he said.

"I have religiously stayed away from any references to food-stamp cuts because that is a pejorative to most folks on the Democratic side, and I'm trying not to let that happen," he said.

"We're going to propose reforms to the policy we believe are in the beneficiaries' best interest as well as respectful of the taxpayer," he said.

He said he and Rep. Colin Peterson, D-Minn. and ranking member on the Ag Committee, are "shoulder to shoulder" on almost everything they'll be doing on the farm bill, and he anticipates Peterson's active involvement.

"I'm going to be working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to get as good a farm bill as we can get so that we can get a big vote in the House and then try to prevail against whatever the Senate might come up with," he said.

Conaway said he is committed to continuing to push the process to get a farm bill done on time.

Senate Ag Committee Chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kan., wants to move quickly as well to give lawmakers ample time to work out the differences between the House and Senate bills before the drop-dead date of Sept. 30, he said.

Could blueberries grow in Idaho?

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

PARMA, Idaho — A University of Idaho researcher and a major hop grower in southwestern Idaho are coordinating their efforts to try to figure out how to successfully grow blueberries in the region.

If their field trials pan out, Brock & Phillip Obendorf Farms could become the first producer to successfully grow blueberries on a large scale in Idaho.

"The jury's still out on how it's going to turn out," said Phil Obendorf, co-owner of Obendorf Farms, one of the state's largest hop growers.

He has been growing 18 acres of blueberries on the farm for two years now, with mixed results. The plants



A southwestern Idaho hop farm is trying to become the first producer in Idaho to grow blueberries successfully on a large scale. The farm has grown them for two years now and is trying to overcome low yields and high soil pH issues.

Tim Hearnden/Capital Press

produce berries but yields are nowhere near what it will take to make it a profitable crop for the farm, which also grows onions, wheat and corn.

Obendorf said high soil pH is proving to be a major challenge. A measure of soil acidity, high pH levels can affect a plant's roots and prevent it from up-taking some micro-nutrients, Obendorf said.

UI researcher Essie Fallahi, who heads the university's pomology program at the nearby Parma experiment station, has been trying to grow blueberries for several years, and he is also having a problem with high soil pH content.

"We are trying to grow blueberries but we are fighting with high pH problems," he said. "It's a major prob-

lem and causes damage to production."

Fallahi said a solution, one that Obendorf is also using, is to add acid when watering the plants.

"The acid brings the pH down and makes the micronutrients available," he said. "When we inject a lot of acid, we have had some success but it is expensive to do that."

Fallahi began growing a blueberry variety provided by Obendorf Farms this year at the experiment station.

"I'm trying to help Essie so he can help me," Obendorf said.

Obendorf said that if the farm's blueberry experiment is successful, it will help the operation diversify.

"We're just looking for another crop that could be the next emerging market in

this area," he said. "There are no blueberries grown locally here (but) there's demand for them."

This year was the first Obendorf Farms sold its blueberries commercially, to three supermarkets, three farmers' markets and four fruit stands.

Obendorf said his plants are yielding about 10 percent of what they need to in order to be profitable but it takes four or five years for them to reach full production.

He's hopeful that despite the current low yields and high pH issue, blueberries will turn out to be a profitable crop for the farm.

"I think it's very promising," he said. "We're definitely hoping for a bigger crop next year. We're planning to keep expanding."

Agency rolls out rules for winery wastewater

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Wineries wash bottles, barrels and tanks, and the water picks up cleansers, stems and dregs and the potential to pollute, according to the Washington Department of Ecology, which will make some winemakers get a permit to irrigate with wastewater.

Ecology will take comments on the proposal until Feb. 14. The permit will also regulate sending wastewater into sewer and septic systems. The rules will apply to wineries that produce more than 17,835 gallons a year, about one-fifth of the state's more than 900 winemakers.

Washington Wine Institute Executive Director Josh McDonald said Monday that the trade group hopes Ecology will raise the threshold. "Our position in trying to work with

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Ecology will hold two public hearings on the proposal:

- 10 a.m. Tuesday, Jan. 30, at Benton County PUD, 250 Gap Road, Prosser.
- 1:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 2, South Bellevue Community College, 14509 S.E. Newport Way, Bellevue.

Written comments may be mailed to: Stacey Callaway, Water Quality Program, Department of Ecology, P.O. Box 47696, Olympia, WA 98504-7696.

Online

ecology.wa.gov/winerypermit

Ecology has been to come as close to doing no harm as possible," he said.

The rules have been several years in the making. Ecology expects to finalize them and start issuing permits next summer. Some large wineries already have wastewater permits, but for the first time the entire industry will be put under uniform requirements. Ecology uses the same reg-

ulatory approach to control wastewater from several other industries, including fruit packers.

"What we hope for is that under the permit, wineries will be able to comply with it without extraordinary actions," Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers lobbyist Mike Schwisow said.

Wineries have not been a "major source" of ground-

water pollution, according to an Ecology fact sheet. The agency cites a Michigan food processor that contaminated groundwater by irrigating as a reason for the new rules.

Ecology says winery wastewater picks up organic material and is typically acidic. Groundwater could be polluted if wineries over-irrigate with untreated wastewater, septic tanks fail or the volume discharged overwhelms treatment plants.

Wineries that come under the regulations will have to submit a pollution-prevention plan.

Wineries generate wastewater primarily by cleaning and rinsing equipment to prevent wine from being contaminated. A typical winery uses 6 gallons of water for every gallon of wine produced, according to Ecology.

McDonald said the wine

institute has been asking from the beginning whether wineries are polluting groundwater. He said wineries made some progress in negotiating the terms of the permit, but the cost and complexity remain concerns. "It's still 80 pages long and still fairly complicated to understand," he said.

An Ecology spokeswoman said Tuesday there have been cases of wineries discharging wastewater high in pH and discharging enough wastewater to overwhelm treatment plants.

In a financial analysis, Ecology estimates that building a small lagoon to hold wastewater would cost \$102,000, while a large lagoon would cost \$315,000.

As a nod to the financial burden of following the rules, Ecology exempted hundreds of small winemakers.

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