

'The bottom line is we want to go back to using common sense'

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visas with a new H-2C program — which passed the House Judiciary Committee in late October — Duvall said there are still some problems to work out with the proposal, but added, “We want a workable program that not only deals with seasonal workers but year-round workers to bring some stability to our workforce.”

Duvall went on to talk about “burdensome” environmental regulations, though he was pleased with the Trump administration’s decision to revoke the contentious Waters of the U.S. rule. Landowners worried that WOTUS would give the Environmental Protection Agency and Army Corps of Engineers regulatory authority over virtually any waters, creating uncertainty for farmers and ranchers.

While the rule has been scrapped, Duvall said farmers need to keep up the pressure on lawmakers to ensure new regulations are clear and workable.

“We all know the other side that opposes us on our effort to rewrite the rule, they’re going to be ready to challenge the next rule that comes forward,” he said.

Unlike the previous administration, Duvall said the current leadership is much more receptive to the Farm Bureau’s concerns and interests. He praised fellow Georgian Sonny Perdue, President Trump’s secretary of agriculture, as someone who relies on sound science and data to make decisions.

“I’ve got high expectations for him doing the right thing,” Duvall said.

Along with Perdue, Duvall said he has seen plenty of promise from

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt and Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke. Together, Duvall said the three men are committed to putting federal land, timber and grazing back to work for rural America.

Duvall specifically mentioned Zinke’s recent proposal to shrink a number of national monuments, including the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in Southern Oregon.

“The bottom line is we want to go back to using common sense,” Duvall said. “As they create those monuments, it becomes a huge burden on our farmers and ranchers who have been there for generations, using those federal lands to graze.”

On the trade front, Duvall said renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, has made for some concerns, though

he remains confident the right people are in place to minimize the risk to agriculture.

“(President Trump) swings a big stick,” Duvall said. “He’s a businessman. We probably really know his techniques. We’re just scared of who’s going to call his bluff.”

Finally, Duvall said the Farm Bureau will be shifting its focus next year to the 2018 Farm Bill in Congress. The top priority will be to maintain federal subsidies for crop insurance.

The Farm Bill is not a safety net, Duvall insisted, but rather a food security act. “Hungry countries and hungry armies are not very strong,” he went on to explain.

Barry Bushue, Oregon Farm Bureau president, said the group was pleased to have Duvall on hand to talk about national agricultural interests.

Closer to home, Bushue said they anticipate a fight heading into the 2018 Legislature against the proposed cap-and-invest energy policy, which he said could dramatically increase fuel and energy costs for Oregon farmers.

“When you’re hauling product and you’re running equipment, those costs add up,” Bushue said.

The annual Oregon Farm Bureau meeting is a chance for delegates from each county Farm Bureau to get together and set their policies for the coming year. The meeting began Tuesday and wrapped up Thursday evening with a reception and banquet.

Duvall said local engagement is critical moving forward, as state and county voices eventually echo their way back to Washington, D.C.

“We have people willing to listen now,” he said.

Much of this year’s harvest was already finished before wildfires struck

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Two months later, Kruse is renting a house in nearby Sebastopol while she considers whether to rebuild or sell her lot. In the meantime, she’s poured herself into her work, helping to get the word out to consumers that California’s iconic wine country is still open for business despite the devastating wildfires that scorched the region.

Authorities are still calculating the damage to agriculture from the 21 wildfires in October that forced 100,000 people to evacuate, destroyed about 8,900 houses and other buildings and killed 43 people, according to the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. About 1,800 homes and other structures were destroyed in the Fountaingrove area in northeastern Santa Rosa.

While state officials have estimated the overall insured losses at \$3.3 billion so far — among the highest of any U.S. wildfires in recent decades — wine industry groups are quick to note that while a handful of vineyards and wineries were destroyed, most others were spared or only minimally impacted.

As much as 90 percent of this year’s harvest was already finished by the time the wildfires blackened portions of Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties, generating international headlines. Of the area’s roughly 1,200 wineries, only 11 were destroyed or heavily damaged, the San Francisco-based Wine Institute reported.

“I think we’re really lucky,” said Heidi Soldinger, marketing and communications manager for the Napa Valley Grap growers. The problem is the public’s perception that the damage was more widespread than it was. Customers are returning, but slowly.

“We are seeing more foot traffic, although it’s definitely not to what it was last year,” Soldinger said.

Tallying damage

Damage to vineyards and other agriculture was less than originally reported. According to grower surveys:

- In Napa County, early estimates are that damage could end up totaling more than \$10 million, with vineyards and tree crops accounting for about 3,500 of the nearly 75,000 acres in the fire zone, county agricultural commissioner Greg Clark said.

- Sonoma County’s confirmed crop loss so far has totaled \$153,000 but grower survey participation has been low, agricultural commissioner Tony Linegar said. According to early reports, about 1,200 grapevines were damaged and will likely need to be replaced, he said. The century-old Stor-



Sonoma County Winegrape Commission

The house of Karissa Kruse, president of the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission, was destroyed by flames in the Fountaingrove neighborhood of Santa Rosa, Calif., in October. She is helping the region’s iconic wine industry attract visitors in the wake of the wildfires. Though a handful of wineries were damaged or destroyed, most are open for business as usual.

netta Dairy in Sonoma also had several buildings burned.

- In Mendocino County, about 65 of the roughly 1,300 acres of vineyards in the fire zone sustained damage, agricultural commissioner Diane Curry said. Vintners figure they lost about 220 tons of grapes, though it could be more because of smoke taint, Curry said.

“There were certainly vineyards that were a total loss, but luckily for Mendocino County we didn’t see a lot of that,” she said. “We had damage to vines — usually the outside vines. It’s going to be interesting to see if they come back and whether they’re going to be OK or if they’re going to have to go ahead (and remove them).”

The county also lost a significant portion of its roughly 30,000 acres of rangeland and as many as 40 head of cattle valued at as much as \$45,000, she said. Total losses of fencing, equipment, employee housing and other ancillary structures is preliminarily estimated at \$1.9 million, she said.

Devastating fires

Among the most devastating fires in the wine country were the 36,807-acre Tubbs Fire between Calistoga and Santa Rosa, which destroyed an estimated 5,300 structures, and the 56,556-acre Nuns Fire near Santa Rosa, which destroyed about 1,200 structures, according to Cal Fire.

Some farms were also hard-hit, including about a half-dozen belonging to members of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers whose diversified produce operations were completely burned, said Evan Wiig, the organization’s communications and membership director.

Among those operations is Oak Hill Farm in Glen Ellen, Calif., where 700 acres of produce and flowers on the west-



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

John and Samantha Speck of San Francisco taste wine at the Chateau St. Jean Winery in Kenwood, Calif., on Nov. 24. Behind them is a forested area blackened by a wildfire in October that temporarily shuttered the winery.

ern slope of the Mayacamas Mountains sustained damage, Wiig said, but the farm is going ahead with a cover cropping workshop it had scheduled before the fires.

“There’s definitely signs of resilience” among growers, he said. “Sales in October were down 50 percent at the farms in Sonoma County, and they’re starting to finally get back to normal or at least close to it.”

Many of the region’s crops were in harm’s way. Among the area’s tree crops are olives, almonds, walnuts, apples, pears and other tree fruit, and timber, which was Mendocino County’s second-highest value commodity in 2015 at \$83.7 million, according to county statistics.

Within the wine industry, several wineries — including Signorello Estates and White Rock Vineyards in Napa and Paradise Ridge in Santa Rosa — were destroyed.

While some early news reports suggested fire damage in the northern San Francisco Bay area could create a shortage of grapes or wines, the Wine Institute noted that 70 percent of California’s wine grape harvest by volume occurs in the inland valleys. Only 10 percent of the grapes by volume are grown in the Napa and Sonoma regions, accord-

ing to spokeswoman Gladys Horiuchi.

Still, the region’s grapes are the state’s most lucrative, with annual wine production valued at a combined \$1.4 billion in Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino counties, according to the counties’ statistics.

Wineries affected

At Signorello Estate, winemaker Pierre Birebent and others were on the property trying to fight back the flames but retreated and made it out safely when the fire overcame the building. The building housed administrative offices, a professional kitchen, tasting room and a residence, spokeswoman Charlotte Milan said.

Signorello has been interviewing architects to build a new headquarters, which will likely take about two years, Milan said.

“We’re not going to have any way to receive visitors for the next couple of years,” Milan said. She added Signorello’s wines, which were either stored in bottles off-site or in barrels that weren’t affected by the fire, will still be available in restaurants and wine stores and by direct sales to customers.

“They actually had a really good October selling wine



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Gary King, center, pours wine for patrons in the tasting room at Chateau St. Jean winery in Kenwood, Calif., on Nov. 24. The winery reopened in mid-November after being closed because of a wildfire in October that burned an adjacent hillside and forested area.

wholesale,” Milan said. “If there’s any sort of silver lining, they have been really, really well supported with the wholesale community and restaurants in the last 45 days. Consumers are excited to see them rebuild.”

Other wineries saw the fires come too close for comfort. Fire on an adjacent hillside and forested area forced the temporary closure of Chateau St. Jean in Kenwood, Calif., for cleanup of downed limbs and other debris. The winery reopened on Veterans Day, nearly fully surrounded by blackened hillsides and charred trees.

“We were welcomed by a line of guests out the door that Saturday morning,” said Brent Dodd, the winery’s communications manager. “It was definitely encouraging for the team and exciting for them.”

The winery’s business was also brisk on Nov. 24, the day after Thanksgiving. John and Samantha Speck of San Francisco had already planned a trip to the winery before the fires, but they were even more determined to come afterward.

“I think there’s hardship (for affected wineries), but there’s also opportunity” to rebuild, John Speck said. He added the couple makes it a point to purchase California wines, and said he thinks the fires may have disproportionately affected smaller wineries.

Efforts are underway to help vintners affected by fires recover. As Gov. Jerry Brown issued an order suspending some fees and rules to speed up recovery, the California Association of Winegrape Growers has pledged to work with the state’s congressional delegation, federal officials and other wine industry organizations to make sure affected growers have adequate recovery resources, the organization stated in a news release.

Regaining tourism

County officials said they had not determined the economic impact of lost tourism because of the fires as resulting road closures and cleanup

restricted access for several weeks. But many businesses and industry organizations say there’s been a significant dip from a year ago.

Among those computing the extent of damage is the Wine Business Institute at Sonoma State University, which began its study on Oct. 11 to evaluate the immediate and long-term effects of the fires on the North Coast’s economy.

Some damage to tourism has been indirect. For instance, a shortage of hotel rooms in Sonoma County has been made worse as people who lost homes have used them for temporary shelter, the county’s Linegar said. Tourists who want to visit are finding it difficult to find places to stay.

“It’s going to be imperative that we get these people who’ve been displaced into some form of temporary housing so we can open up the hotel rooms so tourists can come back and stay,” he said. “The agencies that deal with tourism are aware of that, and the county is aware that there’s a need.”

Visit California, a nonprofit organization that promotes travel and tourism in the state, announced in early November it would spend \$2 million to urge people to return to the wine country.

Local tourism agencies are also urging visits, particularly by Bay Area residents.

“I think all of our respective organizations are working together to get the message out that the 2017 vintage was in by the time the fires came, and the wines on the shelf around the world are still great to buy,” the Sonoma County Winegrowers’ Kruse said.

She and others say a sense of optimism permeates communities in wine country.

“That is one thing I’m already seeing — the spirit of our community coming together,” Kruse said. “It’s pretty amazing in conversations. There’s not a lot of conversation about loss, but there’s a lot of conversation about rebuilding and making it better.”

Oregon is estimated to have more than 100 wolves with numbers expected to climb

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Ranchers would like to see the agency create management units with caps on wolf numbers, but these suggestions have been largely disregarded, he said.

Currently, Oregon is estimated to have more than 100 wolves.

Based on trends seen in Idaho and Montana, however, that number can be expected to climb steeply in the coming years, for which the current draft plan fails to account, said

Jim Akenson, conservation director for the Oregon Hunters Association.

“I don’t know why in the world we would not look to our neighbors to see what will happen here,” Akenson said.

The Oregon Farm Bureau would like to see the plan provide a greater allowance for lethal wolf control when they’re near homes or if they threaten livestock, pets and people, said Kevin Johnson, the organization’s representative.

The agency should also increase

its focus on collaring wolves as their population increases, so their movements and potential livestock interactions would continue to be monitored, he said.

Ranchers feel the plan is overly prescriptive in its wolf management policies despite expectations of a surging population, Johnson said. “They don’t feel like their positions are being heard.”

Environmental groups, on the other hand, claim the plan is overly reliant on lethal wolf control, which

they say is often ineffective.

“Lethal control has often not stopped depredations,” said Nick Cady, legal director for Cascadia Wildlands.

The loss of a top pack member can cause the remaining wolves to become increasingly desperate and more likely to attack domesticated livestock, said Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity.

“There’s increasing science that it creates more problems than it fixes,” he said.

The current draft plan doesn’t benefit anyone “whether they’re wearing cowboy hats or driving Priuses,” said Rob Klavins, Northeast Oregon field coordinator for Oregon Wild.

“This irresponsible and unscientific plan should be shelved,” he said.

Scientists who the agency found credible enough to cite in the plan have objected to how their research was applied, Klavins said. “Those scientists deserve a direct response.”