

Nests are found as far as 50 miles inland along the coast

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move Oregon toward more stringent regulations for all forests.

Bruce Buckmaster, a commission member who voted against the change, said he shared their concerns.

“They’re old enough to know it’s an ironclad law they will undoubtedly be affected,” said Buckmaster, a retired business owner.

Commission members originally considered ordering the agency to develop those survival guidelines without uplisting the species.

This proposal, set forth by commissioner Bob Webber, would have had the effect of creating a roadmap for the murrelet’s recovery that wouldn’t be legally enforceable.

However, the motion resulted in 3-3 deadlock vote, after which Webber changed his mind and supported the uplisting.

“I stated my preference but my least favorite option would be to do nothing,” said Webber, an attorney.

The federal government listed marbled murrelets as

threatened in 1992 and Oregon extended the same status to the birds three years later.

Washington and California consider the species endangered.

Marbled murrelets are known as the “enigma of the Pacific” because so little is still known about their life cycle, said Christina Donehower, strategy species coordinator for ODFW.

“Actual nests for marbled murrelets are extremely hard to find,” she said.

The birds forage for fish and invertebrates in the Pacific Ocean but lay their eggs in depressions formed on the branches of large conifer trees, typically found in “old growth” forests, she said.

Nests are found as far as 50 miles inland along the coast, meaning the species must travel up to 100 miles round trip to feed its young.

Large conifer habitat for the species in Oregon’s coastal forests declined by 58 percent between 1936 and 1996, she said.

Populations of the bird sharply fell in 1996 but the trend was stable to slightly positive between 2000 and



Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission on Feb. 9 voted to put the marbled murrelet on the state’s endangered species list.

2015, when 11,000 marbled murrelets were estimated to inhabit Oregon, Donehower said.

However, demographic models for the species project it has an 80 percent chance of extinction in Oregon within the current century, she said.

The species is doubly challenged because, apart from specialized forest nesting habitat, it’s vulnerable to fluctuating ocean conditions.

The bird’s reproductive potential is low to begin with,

as it reaches sexual maturity relatively late and typically only lays one egg per year.

If food sources in the ocean are inadequate for fledging murrelets, the adults won’t attempt to breed, as occurred in 2017.

“They might not be as resilient as other species to changing conditions,” Donehower said.

Oregon State University is conducting a 10-year study of marbled murrelets that involves capturing the birds

at sea, outfitting them with tracking tags and monitoring their forest nests.

Multiple woodland owners and timber industry representatives urged the commission against uplisting the species until the OSU research sheds more light on its life cycle.

Jim James, executive director of the Oregon Small Woodlands Association, said the uplisting would be premature before the science is better understood.

“It’s not urgent that you make a decision today,” he said. “Murrelet populations are stable.”

An uplisting will likely require private landowners to submit plans for protecting the bird to state regulators, despite assurances the change will only impact state forests, said Rick Barnes, OSWA’s president.

“We all know that’s not the way things work,” he said.

Supporters of the uplisting countered that delayed action has doomed other species due to claims of inconclusive science.

“That is just an argument

when you don’t have another argument,” said Jennifer Wolfsong, who testified in favor of uplisting.

Proponents of endangered status for murrelets also found fault with existing protections for the species on state property.

Currently, clearcutting is prohibited in portions of state forests where the Oregon Department of Forestry identifies murrelet nests during regular surveys.

Forest management is also restricted in surrounding buffers.

Environmental groups — such as those that petitioned for the uplisting — claim the surveys aren’t reliable enough to find many occupied sites.

For example, the birds may be absent from nesting sites due to poor ocean forage conditions in certain years, effectively making forest stand eligible for logging, environmentalists said.

“It’s clear the status quo has failed this species,” said Quinn Read, Northwest director of the Defenders of Wildlife. “It is time to take that next step.”

Universities are devoting serious time, resources to small farm outreach

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Bear Branch Farms grows more than 100 different fruits and vegetables, from early season turnips, radishes and lettuce to rutabagas, sweet corn and sugar snap peas. The farm operates on a Community Supported Agriculture model, or CSA, meaning customers pay upfront for “shares” of the crops. That, in turn, helps the farm stay out of debt and minimize waste.

This year, the Newsoms say there is already a waiting list for their CSA. They credit the farm-to-table movement for educating consumers and driving demand for local, organic food.

“It becomes a relationship with the community,” Nate Newsom said. “They’re able to trust we’re doing the right thing with their produce.”

The trend is not lost on Northwest land-grant universities, which are devoting serious time and resources to small farm outreach. Oregon State University, Washington State University and the University of Idaho have all expanded programs in recent years to help small farmers thrive financially, grow healthful crops and develop community food systems for local consumers.

OSU will host its annual Oregon Small Farms Conference Saturday, Feb. 24, in Corvallis, with a full day of workshops covering everything from organic weed management to financial planning. For the Newsoms, it is an opportunity to learn and swap new ideas with other small farmers from across the state.

“It’s endless,” Nate Newsom said. “There’s always something new to learn.”

‘State of mind’

The federal government defines “small farms” as those making less than \$350,000 in annual income. According to the USDA Economic Research Service, that includes roughly 91 percent of all U.S. farms.

In Oregon, the vast majority of farms — about 87 percent — generate less than \$100,000 annually. In Washington, the total is 83 percent, and in Idaho it is 78 percent.

Most farms are also small in acreage across the three states. In Oregon and Washington, about 73 percent of farms are less than 100 acres, along with 59 percent in Idaho.

Yet Garry Stephenson, director of the Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems at OSU, said the program does not adhere to a hard income or acreage figure. Rather, he described small farming as “a state of mind.”

“A lot of people call it food with a face,” Stephenson said.

The center was begun in 2014 as



Photos by George Plaven/Capital Press

Goats and ducks at Bear Branch Farms.



Nate and Janis Newsom stand along Bear Branch Creek, which flows past their 17-acre family farm outside Stayton, Ore.

an outgrowth of OSU Extension Service’s small farms program, adding new field faculty around the state and expanding research.

The goal, Stephenson said, is to enhance the visibility and profitability of small farms.

“There are going to be some obvious limits to (the scale),” he said. “But there seems to be an interest in accessing locally grown food, espe-

cially in urban areas. ... The farmers who participate need to be nimble in order to keep up with the competition, but there’s definitely a growing market out there.”

Beth Hoinacki, owner and operator of Goodfoot Farm along the Luckiamute River west of Corvallis, said the biggest challenge for her getting started was simply learning the nuts and bolts of farming 40-50

different vegetables, tree fruits and berries.

OSU, she said, has made it easier to access that kind of information.

“It’s not something that is part of our culture anymore,” Hoinacki said.

Washington and Idaho

Small farm programs are also getting a shot in the arm in Washington and Idaho.

For years, the WSU small farms team consisted of a loose collection of faculty, and no university funding. It is now part of the Food Systems Program under the Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources, with 60 faculty.

Laura Lewis was hired as statewide program leader in November. The team is responsible for six areas of emphasis: crop production, food security, energy and waste reduction, economic benefit, processing and distribution, government regulation and resource conservation.

Over the last 10 years, Lewis said there has been a “tremendous shift” in the farm-to-table movement as more consumers demand local produce, dairy, meat and eggs.

It really changes the agricultural landscape,” she said.

Lewis added the center is excited to work with André-Denis Wright, who was selected as the new dean of the WSU College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sci-

ences in January.

“It’s been exciting,” Lewis said. “This is a step in the right direction for WSU.”

Ariel Agenbroad, co-leader of the small farms and community food systems program at the University of Idaho, said most of the farms they work with are less than 100 acres and focused on specialty crops or livestock.

In 2015, the university — in partnership with the nonprofit Rural Roots — received a three-year, \$500,000 USDA grant to assist beginning farmers. Agenbroad said the funding allowed the program to expand its curriculum and farm mentor program to more rural areas statewide.

“Our farmers learn significantly better from other farmers,” Agenbroad said. “Not only do they need to learn about marketing a crop and financial planning, but they also need to learn how to grow things and raise animals.”

Back in Oregon, Janis Newsom, at Bear Branch Farms, agreed that networking with other farms has been an invaluable source of information. But no matter how many conferences they attend, or how many tutorials they watch, nothing will fully prepare farmers until they get out and do the work.

“But if you love it, you do it,” she said. “And we love it.”

Being able to use glufosinate over waterways has made a difference in battle to control plant

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But before the label was issued, glufosinate could only be used during a short window before and after the canals were dry.

The plants are harder to kill during those times because they aren’t growing and taking up the chemical, Posch said.

She said the company is cautiously optimistic that the use of glufosinate during the growing season is the reason for the large reduction in the number of GTCB plants.

“It makes biological sense that the chemical would be making the significant difference,” Posch said. “It’s been a great tool for us.”

Being able to use glufosinate over waterways has made a huge difference in the battle to control the plant, said Malheur County farmer Les Ito, a member of a working group of farmers, irrigation district representatives and others that is coordinating with Scotts in its efforts to control the plant.

“We needed something that could work at the water level,” he said.

Ito said he was initially skeptical about Scotts’ commitment to control the plant, but the company so far is living up to its word.

“We all feel we need to continue to hold Scotts accountable,” he said. “But they are following through on

what they said they would do and I believe they have our best interests in mind. I feel a lot better about it than I did before.”

Ito said it’s unlikely the plant will ever be eradicated from the county “but we can manage it pretty well and we’ll need their help.”