

# FPI provides a great breadth of understanding of farm issues

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Rice, who speaks regularly with FPI leaders, said the group “is actually one of the most important ways we can make sure ag laws actually help agriculture and don’t harm it. It’s an important group that does a lot of good.”

Food Producers meets weekly during Idaho’s three-month legislative session and monthly the rest of the year. During the session, members discuss several dozen bills that could impact agriculture and vote to support or oppose many of them.

So far this year, FPI has discussed 46 bills.

A “green sheet” listing FPI’s stance on these bills appears in legislators’ mail boxes every Wednesday morning during the legislative session.

“Legislators recognize that when Food Producers of Idaho sends in a letter or testifies at a hearing, this message represents a collective voice for the agriculture industry,” said former FPI president Roger Batt, the husband of Gayle Batt and the cousin of Phil Batt, a farmer who started the group and later became Idaho’s governor.

There are many competing interests within agriculture, and the green sheet helps lawmakers understand where the state’s farming industry stands on various issues, Rice said.

“When you have a group that can resolve those competing interests before asking the Legislature for something, that is really important,” he said. “That is what’s unique about Food Producers.”

One of the benefits of the group is that it gives even small farm groups a big voice, said Rick Waitley, who has served as Food Producers’



Lt. Gov. Brad Little speaks at a Food Producers of Idaho meeting in February 2016. FPI allows the many organizations the opportunity to speak to state political leaders with one voice.

executive director since 1989 and has been with the organization since 1977.

## Collective voice

That collective voice provides a great breadth of understanding of farm issues, he said.

“When general ag issues come up, that voice is really important to us,” he said. “It’s a really, really good depth of understanding of agricultural issues.”

FPI members don’t always see eye-to-eye on every issue, “but we accomplish more when we are together than

when we are separated and fragmented,” Waitley said.

The group was formed in 1970 to address farm labor legislation. At one point several years later the group had shrunk to only about six members and was all but dead, Waitley said.

But following what Waitley called a “miserable” three-day planning session, it was reborn as a group that focuses on more than only farm labor issues.

Today, the group represents more than 40 ag-related groups and businesses and deals with dozens of

farm-related issues each year. Organizations pay \$800 a year for a membership with voting privileges or \$275 to become an affiliate member without voting privileges. Individuals pay \$55 to become an affiliate member.

## Other efforts

FPI also created the Agriculture Pavilion, which educates tens of thousands of Idahoans about the farming industry each year at the state fairs.

Food Producers’ annual Ag Summit, which is attended by several hundred leaders of

the state’s farming industry, focuses on several important farm industry issues.

It also facilitated the development of an agriculture and natural resource political action committee and created an Ag All-Star award, which goes to legislators based on how they vote on ag-related issues.

“I think Food Producers is a fantastic group,” said former FPI president Blair Wilson, the Idaho president of Northwest Farm Credit Services, which is an FPI member. “I think all states would benefit from having an organization

like Food Producers of Idaho.”

Because FPI members have such a collective breadth of understanding of the farming industry, the group emerges from discussions with a good road map for how to deal with a problem or help out on a certain issue, said Meridian farmer Drew Eggers, a voting member.

## Seeking consensus

“We can usually come to a consensus, but in those rare instances where there isn’t a consensus, we at least understand where that dissenting voice is coming from and we can still respect their opinion,” he said.

FPI members don’t always agree on an issue at the beginning of a discussion “but by the time it’s done, it’s rare that we don’t figure out a consensus,” Wilson said.

The Idaho Nursery and Landscape Association joined Food Producers as a voting member this year and its membership quickly paid off.

After hearing from an INLA member about how it could harm the nursery industry and all of agriculture, FPI opposed a bill that would have required conspicuous red labels on all plants for sale that could be poisonous to humans or animals if eaten.

The state’s nursery industry has never had lobbyists, so being connected with a room full of people who have done that for years was valuable, said Seneca Hull, who represents the INLA at FPI meetings.

“It’s a great group to have a seat at the table with,” she said. “It’s really helpful to have people who understand how the legislative system works.”

# Filmmakers hope to broadcast the film nationwide next March

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Tanner and Mulkern met during a Focus on Farming conference in Snohomish County, Wash., and launched the partnership to make the documentary.

“Women are farming, they’ve always been farming,” Mulkern said. “What’s missing is their place in history. As we look at agricultural history, we have been conditioned to look at farming as sort of men’s work. We’d really love to reinsert women back into that narrative, to really celebrate those women who have done it all along and are still doing it, and inherited those wonderful legacies.”

The team launched a fund-raising campaign March 8, which was International Women’s Day, with a goal of \$50,000.

It’s important that the project has grassroots support, Mulkern said.

The filmmakers hope to broadcast the film nationwide next March for National Women’s History Month and



Micha Ide with her flock at Bright Ide Acres in Orting, Wash. Washington filmmakers are raising funds to make a documentary about past and present female American farmers.

International Women’s Day.

They are still looking for stories, said Kara Rowe, co-executive producer.

“It seems like every little community has some grandmother’s journal or a little book their aunt put together that talks

about what their great-grandmother did, some of those little stories that are out there but they’re more family heritages



Audra Mulkern/The Female Farmer Project

Kylie Gray of Gray Girl Farms in Othello, Wash., balances being a farmer and a mother. Washington filmmakers are raising funds to make a documentary about past and present female American farmers.

## Online

<http://bit.ly/2pq3waw>

aren’t as well known as some of the male-dominated stories that are out there.”

than publicly known,” she said. “We are still looking for some of those stories about our matriarchs that have always been there, it’s just that their stories

Tanner and Rowe also directed the documentary, “The Gamble: The Washington Potato Story,” and produce the television show, “Washington Grown.”

# At 169 million pounds, hop stocks at highest level in decades

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“I don’t think this hop situation is going to straighten itself out anytime soon,” said Annen. “There’s just too many hops. Too many planted, too many in storage.”

The hop industry is accustomed to the boom-and-bust cycle. A shortage of the crop around 2008 spurred enough production to cause a surplus within three years. At this point, though, hop stocks are 40 percent above that earlier peak.

“That was a pile of peanuts compared to now,” Annen said.

Despite this tremendous heap of unused hops, many farmers and merchants are still in denial about the implications of the oversupply, said Doug MacKinnon, president of the 47Hops, a merchant in Yakima, Wash.

“Nobody wants to admit the severity of the problem today,” he said.

While the hop inventory has continued to accumulate, the crops were grown under contract, which some in the



Workers harvest hop vines near Independence, Ore., in this Capital Press file photo. A record 169 million-pound inventory of hops in the U.S. is prompting concerns of an oversupply.

industry find reassuring, he said.

In MacKinnon’s view, that tranquility is based on a delusion because there’s still an excess of hops for which brewers have no immediate demand.

“The farmer will tell you it’s sold. Some merchants will tell you that too,” he said. “And technically, it is, but it’s not moving.”

The imbalance between supply and demand is based on overly optimistic projections of beer sales, said Jim Solberg, CEO of Indie Hops, a merchant in Portland, Ore.

Major international brewers and larger independent brewers “over-revved on how much could be accomplished and how fast” while the U.S. also saw a profusion of small breweries, he said.

There was a sense that craft beer sales will continue surging as long as brewers invest in more capacity, convincing them to contract for additional hop production, Solberg said.

However, the astronomical growth that brewers were counting on didn’t materialize.

The rate of growth for craft beer sales fell by more than

half between 2014 and 2016, from 22 percent to 10 percent in value, according to the most recent statistics from the Brewers Association.

Sales of craft beer are still rising, but not enough to consume the amount of contracted hops, Solberg said. “It’s just piling up. It just backs up and piles up.”

Much of the hop industry’s expansion was paid for with borrowed money, said MacKinnon.

For growers, investing in poles, trellises, drip irrigation and hop plants amounts to about \$10,000 per acre, while merchants spent about \$1.5 million to \$3 million per warehouse building, he said.

With brewers not using as many hops as expected, some will take the financial hit of honoring contracts but others will abandon their contractual obligation to buy the crop, MacKinnon said.

For merchants, there’s no easy way to deal with brewers who reject hops for which they previously contracted, he said. “You don’t want to sue all your customers.”

Sitting on an inventory of hops isn’t cheap — merchants currently have an inventory of about \$1 billion worth of hops on which they must pay interest, MacKinnon said.

That financial strain makes it harder for them to honor contracts to buy hops from farmers, who have their own debts to pay back, he said.

MacKinnon said he expects the hop industry will face a reckoning within a year, such as the failure of a major company that causes hop inventories to be severely devalued.

His own company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy last year, from which it expects to emerge with a restructuring plan by June, he said.

One way or another, the industry will end up in the same place: With a seriously diminished acreage of hops, MacKinnon said.

Accomplishing this reduction voluntarily would be hard work, but preferable to more bankruptcies, he said. “Everybody needs to be flexible to make this work.”