

PUD extends cryptocurrency power moratorium

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — A moratorium on electrical power applications for cryptocurrency miners has been extended to Aug. 6 by Chelan County Public Utility District commissioners.

After listening to miners asking for service and to customers worried about impacts on rates and power supplies for large amounts of power required by miners, commissioners said more time is needed to study and develop the PUD's response to new load demand.

About 100 people attended the May 14 public hearing and more than two dozen spoke.

Commissioners imposed the moratorium on March 19. They will hold another public hearing on Aug. 6.

The PUD has learned that the definition for high-density power loads it put in place last year is not adequate to address the impacts of a rush of applications for power for cryptocurrency mining, said Steve Wright, the PUD's general manager.

Lindsey Mohns, PUD customer utilities business manager, outlined work so far to understand the impacts of cryptocurrency requests that could more than double the

PUD's retail electrical load.

There are areas where the PUD has transmission capacity to serve high-density loads and areas where it does not. Staff proposed creating a specific cryptocurrency power rate to address risks of miners' mobility, bitcoin price swings and other issues. The PUD will continue discussing how to define such a rate class in June.

On April 16, PUD commissioners unanimously adopted fees of up to \$6,150 for unauthorized electrical use in residential areas and \$11,400 in

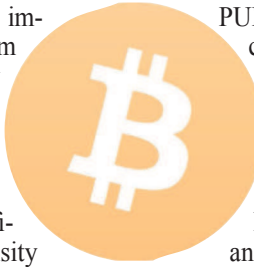
commercial or light industrial areas after staff reported discovering an average of two to three small rogue crypto miners per day.

The PUD produces an average peak of 1,100 to 1,500 megawatts of power annually from Rocky Reach and Rock Island dams. Local load averages 200 megawatts.

Currently, 22 crypto miners use 9 megawatts of an approved 13.5 megawatts, PUD officials have said.

There were 19 crypto applications for 16.3 more megawatts before the moratorium was imposed on March 19.

Looking three years out, the PUD estimates 220 megawatts of crypto demand.



Ag consultant stays busy with H-2A work

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press



Jennifer Uranga

Jennifer Uranga has been helping farmers sign up guestworkers under the federal H-2A visa program since before the recent surge in demand.

She kept books and oversaw safety for an onion and hop grower near Parma, Idaho, for several years. One day, her boss asked her to figure out how to bring guestworkers to the farm through H-2A. She did, and a couple of major fruit growers in the area subsequently asked her to do the same.

Ultimately she started Mountain West Ag Consulting, which acts as an H-2A agent and provides human-resources and food and worker safety compliance services. She has now been working with the H-2A program for nearly five years.

"This is my dream job. I love what I do and I cannot imagine doing anything else," said Uranga, who splits time between in the Wilder, Idaho, and Yakima, Wash., areas.

The Immigration and Nationality Act authorizes the H-2A visa program, which allows a U.S. employer to hire foreign workers temporarily — normally for 10 months or less — for agricultural work when sufficient numbers of U.S. workers are not available.

Demand for H-2A workers is rising.

An Idaho Department of Labor report on agriculture's contribution to the state's economy said the recently shrinking supply of workers prompted agriculture employers to offer benefits, incentives and higher wages, or use the H-2A program.

The total number of certified H-2A positions in Idaho has nearly doubled from 2013 to 2017 — from 1,539 to 2,994 — and these temporary workers are "on pace to become a dominant share of the migrant worker demographic," the report said.

Strong demand keeps Uranga busy, as does the significant paperwork the application process entails.

Before the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services can approve a visa petition for H-2A workers, the employer must receive a temporary labor certification from the U.S. Department of Labor.

A Department of Labor handbook says the prospective employer starts by filing a job order with his or her state's workforce agency 60 to 75 days before the work

start date. The Office of Foreign Labor Certification, within the federal Labor Department's Employment and Training Administration, then requires the employer to file an H-2A application with its national processing center in Chicago at least 45 days before the work start date and submit any additional required documentation by at least 30 days before the work start date. The employer recruits workers, subject to advertising and reporting requirements, after receiving an acceptance notice from the processing center.

"I do not recruit workers," Uranga said. "Rather, in the West, usually the employers contact a recruiter in Mexico or border U.S. states."

She instead focuses on the H-2A application process after exploring the employer's operations thoroughly.

"I visit them, and we talk about their farm and their labor needs," Uranga said. "We ask a lot of questions about their existing work force, and we vet them — their payroll records, HR systems, et cetera."

She said her clients, who pay a consulting fee, are "all over," including Oregon, central Washington and southwest Idaho.

"This year, I picked up some smaller farms needing a couple of workers, but I deal with 20 to 200 workers often," Uranga said.

Workers are contracted for a specified period, such as February through November or August through October. Uranga said it's possible for a grower to write an additional contract and ask for more workers for a known and documented date of need up to a documented end date.

Recently, she and some larger clients have aimed to transfer workers from one contract to another, "which can keep workers here in the U.S. and help another grower," she said.

Uranga also has been involved in efforts to address a recent housing shortage for H-2A workers.

"My phone rings every day with people inquiring about H-2A," she said. More farmers are inquiring about the program, and "a lot are surprised by all of the rules and regulations that go with it."

Yakima hotel converts to farmworker housing

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — A 200-room hotel in Yakima is being turned into seasonal farmworker housing with beds for 800 workers.

FairBridge Inn & Suites, 1507 N. First St., was purchased by First Street Holdings LLC on Dec. 28 for \$3.2 million, according to the Yakima County Assessor's Office.

Valicoff Fruit Co. of Wapato is the managing partner of First Street Holdings, which is renovating the facility and plans to open it June 1 for seasonal farmworkers, said Dan Fazio, director of WAFLA, formerly the Washington Farm Labor Association, in Lacey. WAFLA will assist in management of the facility.

"Farmers will have access to a first-class facility for their workers at less than it will cost for them to build it themselves. We're pleased to be part of it," Fazio told Capital Press.

"We were happy to work with WAFLA and other investors to put this together. Farmers need workers and workers need a place to live," said Rob Valicoff, president of Valicoff Fruit, in a news release.

He could not be reached for further comment.

Fazio said First Street Holdings secured a license from the state Department of Health May 8 to house 800 seasonal farmworkers at the facility. He said the city of Yakima tabled establishment of a new zoning category to allow seasonal farmworker housing but that the use complies with zoning.



WAFLA

FairBridge Inn & Suites in Yakima, Wash., is being turned into housing for up to 800 seasonal farmworkers.

Joan Davenport, city community development director, said Fazio is correct on both counts. She said the city council on May 1 rejected the planning commission's recommendation on a zoning category and wants to do its own study.

First Street Investments registered with the Secretary of State as a corporation on May 7 and lists Fazio as the registered agent and one of four corporate governors along with Mohamed Dobashi, WAFLA's CEO; Robert Valicoff; and Brett Valicoff. Fazio said the listing is in error and that he is neither an agent nor one of the governors. He would not say if WAFLA is a partner in First Street Investments.

WAFLA has contributed "substantially" to the renovations in exchange for a \$12 per night rate for H-2A-visa foreign agricultural guestworkers for WAFLA members and the first right of refusal to all 800 beds, Fazio said. Other users will pay \$14 per night, he said. Growers interested in secur-

ing beds may contact David Guzman, WAFLA Kennewick manager, at dguzman@wafla.org or (509) 440-2826.

WAFLA so far has hired 14,100 H-2A workers from Mexico, mostly for tree fruit growers in Washington and some in Oregon and will surpass 15,000 this season, Fazio said. It is one of the largest H-2A providers in the nation. Valicoff Fruit hires H-2A workers through WAFLA.

Two queen beds per room will be replaced by four bunk beds per room. Each room has two sinks, a shower, toilet, microwave, small refrigerator and television, Fazio said.

A kitchen is being renovated, a cafeteria added, a restaurant turned into a sundries store and there will be laundry facilities and a Mexican bank branch, he said.

Additionally, there's a bar, two pools and a ballroom that seats 420 people, he said.

The cafeteria will provide breakfast and dinner and sack lunches for workers for \$12.26 per day that will be deducted

from their pay, which is allowed under the federal H-2A program, he said.

"Management is going to place everything the workers need right at the site, and of course being in the city makes it more convenient for workers to access other services," said Fazio.

Borton Fruit of Yakima bought the hotel in October and sold it to First Street Holdings, he said.

Borton, Valicoff, the Martinez family connected with G&G Orchards in Cowiche, and a hop grower began talking to the city earlier this year about the need for farmworker housing and talked about using hotels.

WAFLA started construction of its 166-bed Riverview Meadows seasonal farmworker housing in Okanogan in mid-March and hopes to open it Sept. 1.

It recently received notice of award of a \$3 million state grant to help it build another 166-bed facility in Chelan to open in spring of 2019.

Bee colonies remain stable despite steep annual losses

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press



Capital Press File

A bee pollinates blueberry flowers. While beekeepers have experienced severe annual colony losses for more than a decade, they've managed to keep total hive numbers stable, the USDA has found.

was probably caused by market factors, such as the availability of alternative sweeteners.

"Despite the elevation in honeybee colony loss rates since 2006, there is little evi-

dence of disruption to agricultural crop or retail food markets in terms of rising prices or decreasing availability," said the USDA report, adding that "most of the adjustment has occurred at the level of the beekeeper, with less adjustment at downstream levels in the production and marketing chain."

The current cycle of steep hive loss and replenishment is sustainable only in the short term, but not if problems with pests and disease continue to climb, said Harry Vanderpool, president of the Oregon State Beekeepers Association.

"There is no easy money in agriculture and beekeeping follows that saying to the word," he said.

Since the mid-1980s, for example, the number of treat-

ments necessary to fight varroa mites has mounted, Vanderpool said. "Now, it's at a point of almost continuous treatments or manipulations."

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