

Senate committee passes \$145.1B ag appropriations bill

Farm research, organic programs in line for more funding

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

The U.S. Senate is poised to vote on a \$145.1 billion agriculture appropriations bill for fiscal year 2019.

The proposal passed unanimously out of the Senate Appropriations Committee on May 11. It details \$121.8 billion in mandatory program funding and \$23.3 billion in discretionary spending, which is \$710 million less than 2018 levels but \$6.1 billion more than President Donald Trump's budget request.

Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley, who serves as the top Democrat on the

Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, said the bill provides "significant resources for rural Americans and Oregonians," highlighting increased funding for rural broadband, organic farming programs and the USDA Agricultural Research Service, or ARS.

The USDA operates three ARS locations in Oregon — one in Corvallis, one in Pendleton and one in Burns. Research projects focus on a variety of crops, from apples and pears to wheat and alfalfa.

Dan Long, director of the Columbia Plateau Conservation Research Center north of Pendleton, said the station's annual budget has remained flat at \$1.9 million for the last three or four funding cycles.

The station currently supports five scientists on staff, including an agronomist, soil physicist, soil chemist, hydrologist and soil microbiologist. If one was to retire, Long said he would not be able to fill the vacancy due to inflationary costs.

"We've been able to survive through attrition," Long said.

Long said he is not sure where the additional \$100 million would be directed, but is pleased to see lawmakers mulling such a large increase for the ARS, which is more than the service has seen in past years.

"It certainly is a great signal that Congress sees the work that ARS is doing is important to the viability of the nation, the nation's food supply and protection of its resources."

Funding for rural broadband internet would also receive a \$425 million increase in 2019, building on the previous fiscal year's investment of

\$600 million. Farmers and ranchers are becoming increasingly reliant on dependable broadband service as they adopt more precision agriculture technology, such as real-time soil moisture monitors and GPS tractors, into their operations.

Organic farming is another focus in the Senate appropriations bill, with several programs in line for a funding increase in 2019. The USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program would receive \$37 million, up \$2 million from last year.

The National Organic Program would get \$15 million, up \$3 million from 2018, and the Organic Transitions Program — which helps farmers transition their land from conventional to organic farming, a process that takes three years before certification in Oregon — would receive \$6 million, up \$1

million over the previous year.

The appropriations bill also prohibits the federal government from interfering with industrial hemp research and development. Both Sen. Merkley and fellow Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden are pushing to legalize industrial hemp as an agricultural commodity, which Oregon began regulating in 2016. The program now has 382 registered hemp growers and 119 registered handlers.

"This (appropriations) bill takes a much-needed step toward those rural Oregon goals I've long worked to achieve," Wyden said in a written statement.

The bill now heads for a full Senate vote. The House Appropriations Committee already approved its version of the agriculture appropriations bill on May 16 by a 31-20 vote.

Almonds showing promise in Idaho

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Almonds are viable for some commercial production in southwest Idaho, recent university research shows.

Warmer spots in the region show strong promise for some commercial almond growth, said Essie Fallahi, who heads the pomology program at the University of Idaho Parma Research and Extension Center, where a full-orchard study of 16 almond varieties is in its third year.

The pomologist recommends a small test run initially, with university involvement.

"It's definitely worth looking at," Fallahi said.

The recent study on an acre includes varieties selected in part for cold tolerance. About six years ago, UI Parma researchers concluded a smaller study of three almond varieties over 18 years.

Pronounced or ill-timed cold generally cuts yields in the Parma almond orchard but does not decimate the trees, UI researchers found. Almonds have outperformed some better-established Idaho tree fruits in harsh conditions.

Last year's long, bitterly cold winter took out some peach and apricot trees, but not the almond trees, Fallahi said. This year, a hard freeze during full bloom in April probably will cut almond yields by up to two-thirds of the ideal level. But the almond trees survived.

"We had more loss on apricots than we had on almonds," Fallahi said.

Full almond bloom often hits by mid-April, at the end of an apricot bloom that can start as early as mid-March, he said.

"Almonds have at least as good of a chance as apricots to make it in this area as far as production and cold tolerance," Fallahi said. He's optimistic about almonds at least as an Idaho niche



Essie Fallahi, who heads the University of Idaho's pomology program, shows the Fritz almond variety at UI's Parma Research and Extension Center.

crop, in that "almonds can survive if planted in the warmest spots of the region."

Over the 20-odd years UI Parma research plots have had almond trees, strong yields occurred some of the time, "fair" production was common, and "low-to-fair" output occurred in years with unusually cold winter

or spring weather, he said.

Tom Elias, a UI research assistant at Parma, likes what he has seen so far.

"With the climate here, I think the outlook for almonds is really, really positive," he said.

Increased interest in almonds from commercial growers in recently drought-afflicted Califor-

nia and elsewhere helped prompt the current full-orchard trial in southwest Idaho.

Fallahi said a dozen groups of California growers in the past year visited Parma to check out the Idaho almonds.

"We also had (local) beekeepers excited," he said. Honeybees are used to pollinate almond trees.



IDWR
Weiser River flood damage in the winter of 2016-17.

Grants available for flood-management projects in Idaho

By Capital Press

The Idaho Water Resource Board is seeking applications for grants to be used for flood management and prevention. The grants are aimed at stream-channel repair, stream-channel improvement, flood risk reduction or flood prevention projects in rivers and streams throughout Idaho.

Applicants can request funding for up to \$200,000 per project, according to an IWRB press release.

There is a 50 percent match requirement for all grants awarded, and applications that include higher cost-share percentages will receive a higher ranking.

The application period for flood-management grants lasts through June 15. Projects will be reviewed by the IWRB's finance committee, and final grant awards will be made at the July 27 board meeting in Moscow.

The grant program was authorized by the Idaho Legislature this year, which set aside \$1 million for flood-management projects.

The record-setting winter of 2017-18 caused flood damage to several Idaho streams and rivers. That prompted flood-control districts and other groups to approach the Legislature about creating a statewide program for addressing flood-control damage as well as flood-prevention, stream-channel improvement and flood-management work.

To be considered for grant funding, applicants must provide evidence of flood damage or evidence of conditions that create the risk of flooding in a stream channel. Eligible agencies and organizations include flood control districts, counties, municipalities, drainage districts, irrigation districts, canal companies and other public entities.

H-2A rule changes to simplify, improve guestworker program

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Costs of unnecessary recruitment methods should be reduced, the scope and accuracy of prevailing wage surveys should be improved, greater movement of workers to respond to production needs should be allowed, seasonality needs to be clarified and housing and transportation approvals should be streamlined, Nassif said.

Administrative improvements undertaken by one administration are undone by the next, so real reform needs to be legislation, he said.

"Any implication that necessary reforms would be limited to those who use E-verify is concerning," Nassif said.

Marsh said he wants to know what kind of incentives the administration is planning to get people to voluntarily use E-verify.

Mandatory E-verify without work authorization would result in an "immediate huge shortfall of labor," and become "a national worker disaster," he said.

Faster and more lasting H-2A visa program changes could be made through legislation. But a replacement H-2C program proposed in HR 4760, sponsored by House Judiciary Chairman Robert Goodlatte, R-Va., is opposed by Western Growers and other groups. It caps the number of visas and requires workers in the U.S. illegally to return to their country of origin and apply to re-enter. Both of those are viewed as unworkable.

HR 4760 so far does not have enough votes to clear the House and likely would find the Senate even more challenging, Marsh said.

Diamond M ranch braces for another stressful summer

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The ranch rounded up a couple hundred open cows in May from its winter range in southeast Washington. To cover its costs, a cow must raise a calf every summer. The open cows went to an auction yard across the Columbia River in Hermiston, Ore.

The cows fetch something at auction, but they would have been worth more producing calves — in some cases for several more years. "That's quite a slug of cows they're not going to have," said Bill McIrvin, Len's son.

Diamond M's size and the fact that it has a winter range to graze cattle year-round has helped it absorb losses. As the wolf population grows, smaller ranchers who can't afford as many losses will have a hard time staying in business, the McIrvins said.

"What was affecting us will start affecting everyone, and they just can't stand the loss," Bill McIrvin said. "The whole system is pretty tough to live with from the get-go."

Steve McLaughlin, a retired Navy commander who unsuccessfully ran for state lands commissioner in 2016, says he wants to help ranchers document their damages to inform the public debate over managing wolves. He's coordinating an effort to systematically collect reports of losses. "We're not hearing the economic side of things," he said.

Len McIrvin said he welcomed



Don Jenkins/Capital Press
Justin Hedrick of the Diamond M ranch herds cattle May 21 on the ranch's winter range in southeast Washington. The ranch has been battling wolves on its summer range to the north for a decade.

the project. "Steve has done a terrific job of leading this fight," he said.

The ranch loses about 70 head to wolves a year, Len McIrvin said. State wildlife managers typically confirm a handful of depredations. Ranchers can apply for compensation for losses. To avoid giving tacit approval to Fish and Wildlife's management of wolves, the McIrvins said they haven't and won't seek compensation.

"It's such a crooked, damn deal

they're throwing at us," he said. "Wolves and cattle are like oil and water. They do not mix, and they never will."

Ranchers can also apply to be compensated for such "indirect losses" as underweight cattle and more open cows.

A rancher must provide business records and exhaust other possible sources of compensation, such as from environmental groups. No rancher applied for compensation for indirect losses in 2017.

Ranchers blame wolf-caused stress for thin and unbred cows. They say cattle are visibly shaken in wolf country. A 2017 study involving the Eastern Oregon Agri-

cultural Research Center in Burns supports the observation.

Cows were subjected to cotton balls soaked in wolf urine and the reproduction of wolf howls for 20 minutes. They were immediately slaughtered and their brains examined. Researchers reported finding biological markers suggesting post-traumatic stress disorder.

The study's lead author, Reinaldo Cooke, said that the Diamond M's report of more open cows "makes perfect sense to me."

"This kind of report is very common in Oregon and Idaho," said Cooke, who is now an associate professor of beef production at Texas A&M University.



Steve McLaughlin