Editorials are written by or approved by members of the Capital Press Editorial Board.

All other commentary pieces are the opinions of the authors but not necessarily this newspaper.

Opinion

Our View

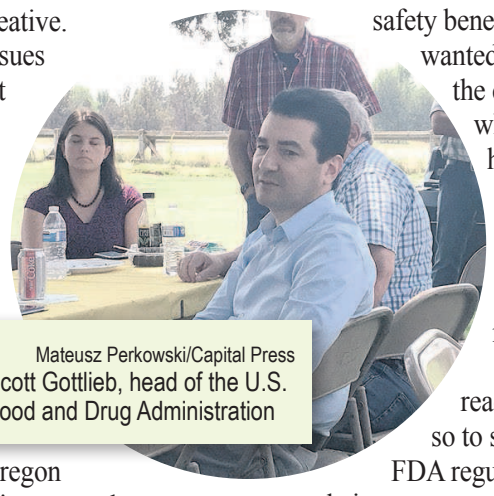
FDA head travels to farm country

It must have been the first time a head of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration ever visited a feedlot in Central Oregon — or anywhere else, for that matter.

But there Scott Gottlieb was, at the Barley Beef feedlot near Bend, Ore., talking about the Food Safety Modernization Act with farmers, ranchers and others. His message: Implementing the easy part of FSMA is done. "The issues we're grappling now are hard."

FSMA represents a sea-change in how the FDA handles food safety. Formerly, the agency concentrated on figuring out what went wrong when someone became ill from food. Seven years ago, Congress changed that role to preventing food-borne illnesses.

As FDA considered how to do that, the agency's regulation writers got creative. Among the issues they looked at was treating irrigation water for onions, though there had never been problems in the past. Ultimately, Oregon State University researchers showed that irrigation water did not cause any bacterial contamination problems in onions. In fact, no E. coli was found in onions even after they were irrigated with bacteria-laden water. Researchers also found that switching from wooden to plastic onion bins would have no food safety benefit. The FDA wanted to require the change, which would have cost millions of dollars and, apparently, accomplish nothing.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press
Scott Gottlieb, head of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration

The issues reached a head, so to speak, when FDA regulators turned their pens to spent grains from breweries. For centuries, leftover grain from making beer has been fed to cattle with no problems. The fact the grain had been steeped in 170-degree water apparently didn't impress the FDA, which wanted spent grains handled the same as all animal feed, including drying and packaging them. The added cost of doing that meant the spent grains would go to landfills instead.

After brewers in Oregon and around the U.S. pointed out those senseless requirements to members of Congress, including Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., the rules were dropped.

And all that was the easy part of FSMA?

The FDA doesn't want to saddle the fresh produce industry with burdensome unintended consequences, Gottlieb told the group at the feedlot. That sounds good.

We can only hope FDA regulation writers stick to science and not extrapolations of their imaginations as they come up with ways to keep the U.S. fresh food supply safe. They should not get extra credit for creating solutions to problems that don't exist.

Gottlieb, who is a doctor and has worked at FDA even before becoming its top administrator last year, also faces a pile of other agriculture-related issues, including the insistence of some food manufacturers on using the term "milk" on their concoctions made from soybeans, nuts, rice and other commodities. Another issue is whether the FDA or USDA should oversee the production of meat grown in petri dishes. Ranchers favor USDA for that job.

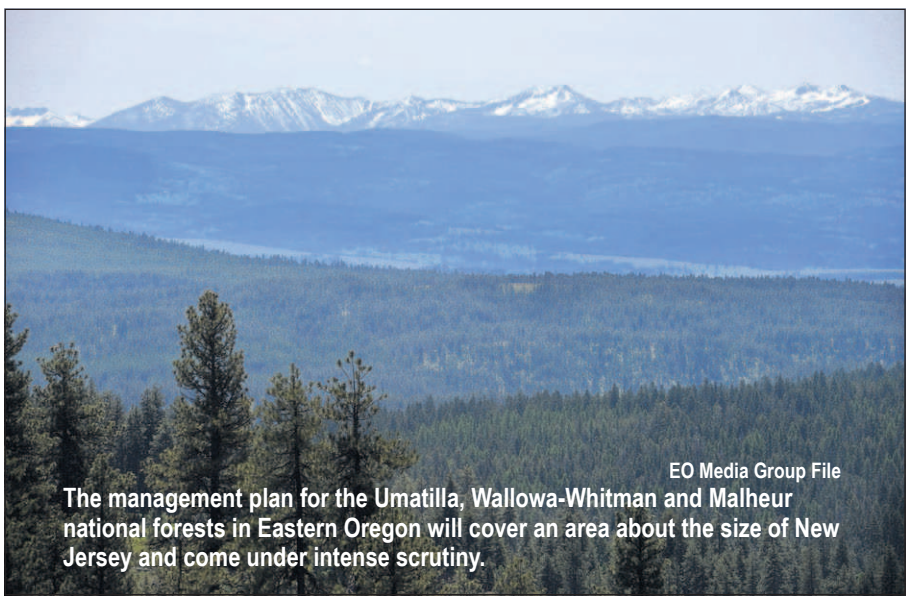
We're rooting for the good doctor to continue to simplify FSMA regulations and make sure they prevent food safety problems without preventing farmers, ranchers — and even brewers — from doing their jobs safely and efficiently.

Our View

New forest plan a work in progress

The U.S. Forest Service is taking comment from individuals and groups with legal standing to file objections on its final draft of the much-anticipated Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision.

The plans, which were last updated in 1990, will guide land management activities — including timber harvest, livestock grazing and recreation — over 5.5 million acres in the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests in Eastern Oregon for the next 10-15 years.



EO Media Group File
The management plan for the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests in Eastern Oregon will cover an area about the size of New Jersey and come under intense scrutiny.

The Forest Service has been working to replace the 1990 management plan since 2003. Four years ago it released a draft Environmental Impact Statement for a proposed replacement. Near universal backlash from timber, grazing, recreation and environmental interests prompted three years of "re-engagement" with the public.

The Forest Service says its preferred revision calls for more active management to improve forest health and reduce the risk of the large and dangerous wildfires plaguing the West.

To that end, the plan calls for doubling the annual timber harvest across all three forests from a recent average of 101 million board-feet to 205 million board-feet. It could also add as many as 51,600 animal unit months, or AUMs, associated with vacant allotments for livestock grazing across the three forests.

Stakeholder responses to the revisions have been tepid at best.

Doubling the timber harvest would be a boon to loggers and the economies of communities that once depended on the paychecks from lumber mills.

But timber interests say the proposed revision doesn't offer any guarantees the Forest Service will be able to meet those targets each year. It's impossible to maintain mills and other industry infrastructure without that certainty.

Livestock producers would like to be able to graze more cattle and sheep in the forests.

There have been many changes to the management of the forests in the last 28 years that have caused the active number of AUMs to decline from what was provided in the 1990 plan.

The 1990 plan called for 524,000 AUMs for grazing, but only 242,800 are currently available. The revised plan calls for up to 294,400.

Ranchers are skeptical they'll actually get to graze on those additional AUMs.

Environmental groups, on the other hand, say the plan places too much emphasis on resource extraction, and does not do enough to protect old-growth trees and wildlife.

We think more logging and more grazing is a good idea. The fuel load in the forests needs to be reduced. Rural communities in Eastern Oregon could use the 1,200 extra jobs and additional $60 million in income the plan could generate.

Those with standing have until the end of the month to comment. The Forest Service then has 90 days to make further revisions.

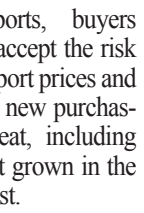
Whatever plan is eventually adopted, the operational details will be as much a product of litigation as careful consideration.

Because in the end, it's the federal judiciary, not the Forest Service, that writes the working forest management plan.

Wheat farmers becoming long-term casualties of Trump's trade wars

By JIMMIE MUSICK
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
Jimmie Musick



There's a reason it's called a trade war. There are casualties. The first victims on this battlefield are American farmers. Like any battle, the element of surprise can be advantageous, but wheat farmers in America are the ones standing by in shock.

Those in American agriculture rightfully worry that the administration's unconventional approach to trade may create long-term financial problems. The United States' withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) continues to harm growers and further puts the country at a competitive disadvantage.

The administration's flippant rhetoric around the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has made the United States appear to Canada and Mexico as an unreliable trading partner.

Lastly, the trade war between the U.S. and China could have a devastating and lasting effect on wheat farmers.

Japan is the one of the largest, most valuable markets for U.S. wheat in the world. Of the 6 million metric tons (MMT) of wheat it imports each year, more than half is grown in American fields.

The United States' absence from the new Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP-11) continues to threaten America's wheat farmers by putting us at an economic disadvantage to our largest competitors in this market, Canada and Australia. Once implemented, both countries, who are parties to TPP-11, would face a lower effective tariff on their wheat, which could reduce the U.S. market share from 51 percent to 23 percent, according to industry estimates. This represents a loss at today's wheat prices of about $500 million per year, which would cause the entire U.S. wheat supply chain to suffer significant economic damage and job loss.

Mexico is a top 10 market for the three largest classes of U.S. wheat and the largest market overall. This is almost entirely attributable to the North American Free-Trade Agreement (NAFTA). U.S. wheat exports to Mexico jumped 400 percent in the 10 years after the agreement went into effect compared to the 10 years before. In April 2017, the administration threatened to withdraw from NAFTA. As a result, Mexican buyers have sought to diversify as they increasingly view the administration's trade threats as indicators that the United States is no longer a reliable partner.

So far this year, sales to Mexico are more than a million metric tons lower than they were at this point last year. The fear from agriculture groups and farmers across the country is not only focused on trade retaliation, but also being able to rebuild a trade relationship with Canada and Mexico moving forward.

From March to June, over the past three years, Chinese flour milling companies and state-run importers purchased an average of about 20 million bushels of U.S. wheat, delivering a return of $145 million to American farmers and grain handlers. When the administration announced in March that it would impose sweeping tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum imports, buyers were unable to accept the risk of escalating import prices and stopped making new purchases of U.S. wheat, including soft white wheat grown in the Pacific Northwest.

A 25 percent import tariff on American wheat means that China will likely purchase wheat from our competitors instead. The exchange of punitive tariffs between Washington and Beijing today represents the next phase of what could be a long and difficult struggle that will likely inflict more pain before we reach an unknown resolution.

The current trade climate is hindering the livelihood of America's hard-working farm families. Implementation of TPP-11, without the United States, could demolish more than 60 years of hard work by multiple generations of U.S. farm families to develop a large and loyal market for U.S. wheat in Japan.

The United States needs to negotiate more comprehensive trade agreements like TPP and NAFTA. Growers want trade and not aid. U.S. Wheat Associates estimates that if China and Mexico continue this present course, 2018/19 exports could drop from 27 to 24 MMT, ending stocks would rise to 33 MMT, and wheat farmers could be hit by a 75-cent loss per bushel. This results in a value loss of $2.48 billion in 2018/19 alone, a devastating hit to U.S. wheat farmers.

The administration needs to stop alienating our top trading partners and restore certainty to the agricultural marketplace as soon as possible.

Jimmie Musick is the president of the National Association of Wheat Growers (NAWG) and a wheat farmer from Sentinel, Okla.

It's time to understand and embrace neonicotinoid insecticides

By JULIE MURPHREE
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
Julie Murphree

Neonicotinoid insecticides aren't the problem for bees that activists have made them out to be. In fact, years of monitoring show proper use of neonicotinoids doesn't harm bees. But a combination of issues do negatively impact bee health, according to experts.

In recent years, changes in colony health and fluctuations in bee numbers have caused concern. Multiple influences have challenged hive health and honeybee populations. These include: the parasitic varroa mite (the largest contributor to bee loss); disease; loss of forage diversity; pesticides; adverse weather conditions; and bee nutrition.

Despite this, the number of bee colonies is growing, according to the Agriculture Department.

So, continuing to emphasize best management practices will continue to help protect bees, including the use of a relatively new class of insecticides, called neonicotinoids.

Neonicotinoids, more commonly referred to as neonics, are a specific class of neuro-active insecticides chemically like nicotine. Shell and Bayer began work on their development in the 1980s and 1990s because this class of insecticides was found to be less toxic to birds and mammals and when properly applied resulted in minimal impact.

Ultimately, neonicotinoids, because of lesser toxicity than other insecticides, became widely used in urban landscapes and on farms. Despite this, there have been calls to ban this class of insecticide.

Researchers from the universities of Wageningen, Ghent and Amsterdam summarized 15 years of research on the hazards of neonicotinoids to bees. While many laboratory studies and other studies applying artificial exposure conditions described sub-lethal and other effects, no adverse effects to bee colonies were ever observed in field studies at field-realistic exposure conditions. Another recent causal analysis by U.S. researchers likewise concludes that neonicotinoids are unlikely to be a cause of honeybee colony losses.

These findings are in line with many large-scale, multifactorial studies undertaken in the U.S., Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany and other countries. These studies have shown that poor bee health is correlated with the presence of varroa mites, viruses and many other factors (above), but not with the use of insecticides, such as neonics.

The key is properly using this insecticide to manage pests, as with any insecticide. And properly using neonics isn't rocket science.

To keep risk to bees, birds and mammals low, three main strategies must be applied:

- Follow insecticide label directions.
- Restrict applications to the soil when possible.
- Treat only when you have an infestation.

Finally, neonicotinoids are an important part of maintaining plant and insect health, a critical part of why this class of insecticide has become widely used and is considered important in agriculture.

Banning neonics represents serious consequences. If neonicotinoids were no longer available, we'd have major concerns in agriculture — older, more toxic insecticides would be used; operating costs would increase; crop yields would decline; and insect challenges and resistance would occur.

Julie Murphree is outreach director at Arizona Farm Bureau. This column was adapted from a blog post published by Arizona Farm Bureau. It appears courtesy of the American Farm Bureau Federation.