

Oregon farmers aim to clean up ditch regulations

Legislative work group plans to introduce bill in 2019 session

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Cleaning out seven miles of ditches isn't the most enjoyable task on John Scharf's farm, but it's not one that can be neglected without consequence.

Unless silt is removed from the ditches on a rolling basis, they'd eventually fill with dirt. Even before then, the tile lines that drain his fields near Amity, Ore., would clog and water would "blow out" holes in the ground that are hazardous for machinery.

"We don't do it any more than we have to because it's expensive, but it's part of farming," Scharf said. "We do it annually any year we can afford it, because if you put it off, it gets worse."

Scharf recently spoke at a legislative work group, which is looking at introducing a bill to streamline regulations for ditch cleaning in 2019.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Farmer John Scharf explains the drainage of tile lines from his fields near Amity, Ore., into a ditch. Ditch cleaning is complicated in Oregon by a removal limit of 50 cubic yards of material per year from designated wetlands.

The problem is that under Oregon law, Scharf and other growers are limited to removing 50 cubic yards of material from ditches in areas that have been designated wetlands.

In effect, that cap prevents Scharf from cleaning out all the silt that's necessary, meaning the backlog of accumulated dirt keeps mounting.

"I don't want to jeopardize my tile lines," he said. "If the outlet is plugged, you've got a problem."

While the Department of State Lands, which regulates

wetlands, ostensibly allows for the maintenance of agricultural drainage ditches, many are considered "channelized streams" that fall under the agency's jurisdiction, said Mary Anne Cooper, public policy counsel for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

If those channelized streams are judged to contain "essential salmonid habitat," even removing 50 cubic yards a year requires a permit from DSL, she said.

In recent years, the Farm Bureau has noticed an uptick of enforcement activities

by DSL over ditch maintenance — in one case, pulling blackberries was considered removing vegetation from a waterway, Cooper said.

The increase seems to mostly stem from complaints by neighbors or other state agencies, she said.

Farmers who want to remove more than 50 cubic yards while avoiding regulatory problems can apply for a "general permit" from DSL to work in a waterway, Cooper said. Even then, they're currently limited to 100 cubic yards of material, which often "does not scratch the surface" of necessary maintenance.

Removing more than 100 cubic yards would require an "individual permit" from the agency, which involves notifying the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and clearing steep regulatory hurdles, she said.

"An individual permit is an incredibly complicated process to go through," Cooper said.

Scharf is conducting a "pilot project" to demonstrate to DSL that more than 100 cubic yards can safely be removed from ditches in the late summer or early fall,

but the Farm Bureau hopes to obtain broader relief during next year's legislative session.

Eric Metz, planning and policy manager for DSL, said the agency is mandated by law to protect the waters of the state, so it tries to avoid, minimize or mitigate work in waterways.

"When we roll it out by the letter, it's very awkward" when applying permit requirements for ditch cleaning, he said during an Aug. 28 meeting of the legislative work group in Salem, Ore.

The agency feels it's doing a good job following the letter of the law but it's not aiming to interfere with farm operations, Metz said. "But we also know there are fish in those ditches, so there's the dilemma."

During the meeting, Cooper of the Farm Bureau pointed out that ditch maintenance never occurs in wet conditions and there are environmental benefits to the work.

Growers have been keeping ditches functional for about 100 years, preventing them from filling up, she said. "That habitat won't exist if we don't resolve these issues."

New PNW regional forester announced

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

The U.S. Forest Service has named a new regional forester for the Pacific Northwest covering Oregon and Washington.

Glenn Casamassa, a long-time Forest Service employee and former supervisor of the Arapaho and Roosevelt national forests and the Pawnee National Grassland in Colorado, took over Sept. 17 at the Portland office. He succeeds Jim Pena, who retired July 3.



Glenn Casamassa

Casamassa is a 30-year veteran of the Forest Service. As the regional forester, he will oversee 16 national forests, two national scenic areas, the Crooked River National Grassland in Oregon and two national volcanic monuments.

In a statement released by the Forest Service, Casamassa said he is committed to working with agency employees, tribes and local communities to share stewardship of public lands across the two states.

"Being good neighbors and setting a standard of excellence for public and customer service are priorities for the region in working alongside the people who care for, value, and depend upon these lands," he said.

Casamassa earned his bachelor's degree in forest ecology from Utah State University, and completed post-graduate work in logging system engineering at the Oregon State University College of Forestry. He began his career as a forestry technician, working as a seasonal firefighter on the Tonto National Forest in Arizona.

Casamassa landed his first permanent job in the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, and from there went to work on the Wasatch-Cache National Forest in Utah. He has also served as district ranger of the Moab and Monticello ranger districts on the Manti-La Sal National Forest, and was the regional environmental coordinator for the Forest Service Intermountain Region, spanning portions of Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho and Nevada.

Casamassa also worked as a legislative affairs specialist in Washington, D.C., headquarters. Forest Service Interim Chief Vicki Christiansen said Casamassa has played a leading role in reforming regulations at the national level, and brings with him "tremendous land management and conservation leadership experiences."

Nurseries eye e-commerce opportunities

Buying plants online is expected to be increasingly common

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

PORTLAND — As Tom Fessler thought about the future of his family's nursery, he couldn't help but notice the growing importance of e-commerce to the overall retail industry.

"The millennial generation, that's how they buy things, so we want to get a hold of them," said Fessler, co-owner of Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas in Woodburn, Ore.



Sid Raisch

Earlier this year, the nursery agreed to become one of five wholesale suppliers to Bower & Branch, an online seller of nursery stock.

Fessler said he expects the site to be a long-term investment for his family's company and doesn't have "grandiose ideas" about an immediate sales surge, but would be satisfied if Bower & Branch eventually generated 10 percent of its revenues.

"I don't think it's going to eliminate garden centers," he said. "I think it's going to be in addition to that."

About 85 garden centers have signed up as members of Bower & Branch, serving as the "last mile provider" of care for plants before they're picked up by customers, said Sid Raisch, the company's president and CEO.

The arrangement earns retailers a commission while increasing the selection of plants they offer without saddling them with a larger unsold inventory, said Raisch, who recently gave a presentation on the topic at the Farwest Show in Portland, Ore.

Bower & Branch has found that roughly 50 percent of its sales come during hours that garden centers aren't typically open, showing there's a demand for e-commerce in nursery stock, he said.

"People are now expecting to buy that way, and that's a big driver," Raisch said. "Our industry cannot hold back people's desire to buy that way."

The company aims to expand its decentralized "supply and distribution model" — under which its trucks deliver online orders to garden centers for pick-up — to additional retailers and wholesale suppliers, he said.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Nursery industry professionals recently gathered at the Farwest Show in Portland, Ore., to learn about trends in the business. The possibility of using e-commerce to reach consumers was discussed at the event.

If consumers choose to pay for a direct delivery, rather than pickup at a retailer, that's an also option for most plants.

While venture capital or private equity firms would expect to quickly reap a high return on such an investment, Bower & Branch instead relies on companies experienced with the seasonality and other vagaries of selling nursery stock, Raisch said.

"It's an effort within the industry to create this, as opposed to outsiders from other industries," he said.

Ornamental plants pose unique challenges for e-commerce because the product is highly perishable — requiring regular light and water — and prone to losing its blooms and other quality markers during transport, said Robin Cross, an agricultural economist who's studied the nursery industry.

"You can't store them in an Amazon warehouse for three months in a box, then ship them," Cross said.

Using the traditional "nursery to garden center" distribution method would

seem to solve this problem, though retailers such as Amazon have made inroads with smaller, easily shippable plants such as cactuses, he said.

Pulling individual orders for online buyers may be challenging for growers, but the problem would be mitigated as they build scale, Cross said.

The nursery industry is also highly adaptable and flexible in assembling orders, with some companies pulling from as many as 2,700 differ-

ent varieties, he said.

Bower & Branch pays growers more for putting together complicated orders and has also developed a way for them to deal with smaller orders, Raisch said. "We help them with that because we've been through that before."

Raisch said nursery producers shouldn't think they "have to" get involved in e-commerce, but rather that they "get to" take advantage of a new opportunity.

"The greatest cost is not having a sale," he said.

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