

Food security forum will focus on loss of farmland

Farmer advocacy group: 3 acres lost to development every minute

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

John Larson, senior vice president of national programs for the American Farmland Trust, will speak about the loss of farmland to “buildings and asphalt” during an Oct. 26 food security forum in Walla Walla, Wash.

The U.S. has lost 31 million acres of valuable farmland over the last two decades, Larson says. He will deliver the keynote address during a food security forum that starts at 8 a.m. Oct. 26 at the Walla Walla Community College Water and Environmental Center.



John Larson

Larson is senior vice president for national programs for the American Farmland Trust. The organization is accessing USDA data to determine where the “most productive, resilient and versatile” farmland is.

The farmland lost is usually developed “to the point that it is now buildings and asphalt,” he said.

About 13 million acres were lost to low-density residential development such as 1-acre lots.

“It’s happening not just in urban and suburban settings, but also in very rural settings,” Larson said. “That was eye-opening for us.”

“The farmland that produces food for America is in danger,” said Hannah Clark, Pacific Northwest regional director for AFT. “Nationally, we’re losing 3 acres of farmland per minute. That’s a staggering number that should make us all come to attention. If we don’t have farmland, the food supply isn’t there.”

Urban development hinges on the proximity to necessary natural resources, much like the historic settlement of major cities, Larson said.

“We’re developing our most productive (farmland) at a higher rate of development than other lands,” he said. “As those more productive acres are developed, the potential is to push us onto more marginal ground to try to grow the same level, if not (more).”

The impact of trying to grow more food on less-productive ground would have environmental and economic ramifications, Larson said.

“It’s a matter of protecting the right acres that we need for the food we grow,” he said. “It’s also a matter of giving the information to municipalities, townships and counties to make better planning decisions. There are certain places where we should develop, but there are also places where we shouldn’t.”

The forum also includes panels on tools for agricultural land protection, food defense and safety and steps to build resilience.

Availability of land and products is the biggest need in food security today, said Lindsey Williams, director of the Agriculture Center of Excellence. The centers are flagship institutions funded by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges to connect education and industry.

“Agriculture touches so many, if not all, parts of the U.S. economy, and we have a responsibility to protect those who produce our food, their products and their land,” Williams said.

Funding available for growers to try commodity buffers

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

SPANGLE, Wash. — Funding is available to farmers in the Spokane River watershed who install unique environmental buffers along area streams, Spokane Conservation District officials say.

Farmers who install the so-called commodity buffers receive payments based on the value of their adjacent crops.

About 15 farmers attended meetings last week in Spangle and Reardan, Wash., to learn about the buffers, said the district’s commodity buffer coordinator, Seth Flanders.

The district calls the program a “game-changer” because payments to farmers are based on crop values instead of traditional soil rental values. Payments are based on USDA Risk Management Agency pricing for the crop grown next to the buffers. Farmers are guaranteed a minimum \$200 per acre payment.

Applications are due Nov. 2. Runoff from farms has been blamed for muddying the Spokane River. The buffers are intended to reduce the runoff.



Charlie Peterson



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Spokane Conservation District commodity buffer coordinator Seth Flanders talks to farmers about funding available to put in environmental buffers adjacent to their crops during an Oct. 4 meeting in Spangle, Wash.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program manager Charlie Peterson said the district has already put in 50 miles of buffers for roughly \$50,000. The district has enough funding to install four times as much, he said.

Funding for the buffers comes from the Washington State Conservation Commission, Flanders said.

Buffers can be a grass-only filter strip or a native riparian forest, consisting of grasses, trees and shrubs, according to the district.

Growers must make sure buffers are kept clear of weeds and grasses cut at least one time in the three-year contract cycle, after July 1 due to potential for habitat and bird nesting. The district encourages farmers to make a cutting each year,

if possible, Flanders said. “The whole idea of it is you have this grass that’s absorbed all the nutrients,” he said. “If you just let it die (and) decompose right into the water again, you’re putting all the nutrients back into the water and that kind of defeats the purpose.”

Marci Green, a Fairfield, Wash. farmer and president of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers, said her family has signed up for the commodity buffer program where it makes sense for their farm plan.

“They’ve actually made it financially feasible because they pay based on what the adjacent crop is, so it makes it more worthwhile to put the buffer strips in,” she said. “It’s always good to do the conservation things, but it has to pencil out, too. We need to have an impact to the bottom line.”

Green advises other farmers to look into the buffers.

“You don’t have anything to lose and it might be a way to be compensated for something you were wanting to do anyway,” she said.

Flanders said the district will work with growers.

“It’s something you can try,” Flanders said. “There’s no minimum or maximum you have to put in. It’s something you can experiment with.”

Governor moves to head off Trump, shift water and air regs into state law

By **CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown wants to guard against a rollback of federal environmental rules by moving them into state law where the Trump administration couldn’t touch them.

Brown, a Democrat up for re-election next month, has proposed legislation that would have the state adopt all federal clean air and water standards as of Jan. 19, 2017 — the day before Donald Trump was inaugurated.

“As states, we can take a leadership role in preventing the erosion of core laws that protect our environment,” Brown said in remarks at an event at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry

Oct. 3. “Together, states must stand up to the Trump administration’s continuous attacks on our health and environment.”

Brown said that the Trump administration has already scaled back some rules that aim to keep the country’s air and water clean.

The administration has repealed or proposed elimination of about 46 regulations, according to Brown’s office, citing the Harvard Environmental Law Program Regulatory Rollback Tracker.

These include fuel efficiency standards and regulations on mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants. Oregon has one such plant.

The Environmental Protection Agency is also considering aspects of rules adopted

in 2016 to require reduced emissions from public landfills. Landfills emit high levels of gases such as methane and carbon dioxide. Nationally, they are the third-largest source of anthropogenic methane emissions.

Eight state attorneys general, including Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, sued the EPA over the proposed rollback in May “on behalf of (Oregon’s) citizens and residents to protect their health and well-being and to protect natural resources held in trust by the state.”

“It is widely assumed that the next wave of rollbacks will be to core safeguards of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act,” according to Brown’s press release.

“Over the past two years

Oregonians have witnessed an unprecedented and aggressive attack on clean air standards, clean water standards, and federal efforts to fight climate change,” Brown said. “In Oregon, that rollback stops now.”

Nikki Fisher, a spokeswoman for the governor, said in an email that there would be no expected additional cost to state government as a result.

The announcement comes the morning after the first debate of Brown’s re-election campaign.

Her opponent, state Rep. Knute Buehler, R-Bend, said in response to Brown’s proposal that he too would “defend Oregon and our clean air and clean water.”

“As governor, if the Trump

administration attempts to roll back rules that safeguard Oregon’s environment, I will defend Oregon and our clean air and clean water,” Buehler said in a written statement on Oct. 3. “I have shown this repeatedly by breaking with my party on this important issue. I opposed the president’s decision to remove the U.S. from the Paris climate agreement and broke with my party to replace coal energy in Oregon with cleaner renewables like wind and solar.”

Buehler supported 2016 legislation that required Oregon to stop using coal-generated electricity by 2030.

He also criticized Brown’s direction of the state Department of Environmental Quality, which regulates air and water.

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