

Bill would streamline ditch-cleaning regulations

Proposal would allow farmers to remove more soil from ditches without permit

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Oregon farmers would be allowed to clean out drainage ditches without a state fill-removal permit under a bill to be considered by lawmakers next year.

Currently, growers face restrictions on ditch cleaning if they're working in wetlands or if the ditch is considered a "channeled stream" that contains salmon habitat.

Removing up to 50 cubic yards of soil from a ditch is allowable in a wetland unless

it's considered fish habitat, in which case farmers must obtain a permit from the Department of State Lands.

If they want to remove more than 50 cubic yards from a non-fish-bearing ditch, farmers must obtain a permit, and the requirements become more complex if they want to remove more than 100 cubic yards.

The Oregon Farm Bureau has grown worried about an uptick in complaints about ditch cleaning to DSL in recent years and the backlog in maintenance some



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.

growers face due to removal limitations.

The organization partic-

ipated in a work group this year that's culminated in legislation that would allow

farmers to remove up to 3,000 cubic yards per mile of ditch over five years as long as the channel is dry and they follow other conditions, such as notifying DSL, minimizing erosion and replanting vegetation.

On Dec. 14, the House Agriculture Committee unanimously voted to introduce the "legislative concept" as a bill during next year's legislative session.

Farmers would not be allowed to relocate channels under the proposal or to make them deeper or wider than has traditionally been necessary for drainage, among other restrictions, while DSL and the Oregon Department of Agriculture

could still adopt rules modifying volume limits.

Related legislative concepts introduced by the committee include two proposals that would require DSL to study potential changes to fill-removal law and to study wetland mitigation banks — under which new wetlands are developed to compensate for losses elsewhere — to see how they could be made more effective.

Another proposal would require state agencies to study developing a permit specifically for landowners in Eastern Oregon for fill-removal activities necessary for wetland and stream restoration on private property.

Farm bill covers bases for U.S. ag

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

With House and Senate approval of the Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018, odds are good that farmers and ranchers will be toasting the new year with federal farm policy firmly in place.

The new farm bill provides a projected \$428 billion in funding over five years for vast array of programs. The majority of the budget, 76 percent, goes to nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Crop insurance, conservation and commodity programs account for 23 percent of anticipated farm bill spending. The remaining funding would support programs in the areas of trade, rural development, energy, forestry, horticulture, research and extension, credit and miscellaneous other items.

The most important thing about the new farm bill is that Congress "got one done before the end of the year ... we're not starting over with a new Congress," Andrew Walmsley, American Farm Bureau Federation's director of congressional relations, said.

The bill provides five years of certainty on risk-management programs, crop insurance and other programs, he said.

The bill awaiting President Trump's signature lets agriculture know what the ground rules are, although it still has to go through implementation with USDA, he said.

"Overall, it's a pretty good bill in a very tough political climate," he said.

One of the key outcomes of the new farm bill is that crop insurance is protected, providing another five years of a good crop insurance program, he said.

"It's a vital tool for both farmers and lenders," he said.

The bill expands insurance coverage to hemp and forage and grazing crops, providing separate policies for crops, such as winter wheat, that can be both grazed and harvested. It also instructs the Risk Management Agency to focus on improving insurance for crops affected by hurricanes and tropical storms, different irrigation systems, losses in crop quality and grain sorghum.

The legislation makes improvements on a good existing program, he said.

Improvements were also made to the Agricultural Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage programs by updating the election process, he said.

The new policy allows producers to choose between the two programs on an annual basis beginning in 2121 on a crop-by-crop and farm-by-farm basis. It also allows farmers to update program yields, and it adjusts reference prices when market prices improve and increases marketing assistance loan rates.

"For dairy, the new margin coverage program is a big win," he said.

The bill adds higher coverage levels for a farmer's first 5 million pounds of milk and expands the range of production a farmer can insure — 5 percent to 95 percent. It also reduces premiums for insured milk in excess of 5 million pounds.

Livestock producers will also benefit from the \$300 million over 10 years targeted for animal disease prevention and management, which includes funding for a foot and mouth disease vaccine bank and the new National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program.

Being prepared and able to respond to an international disease making its way to the U.S. was one of the biggest priorities for livestock producers to protect the U.S. industry, he said.

Conservation programs mostly stayed the same but with some improvements, he said.

The acreage cap in the Conservation Reserve Program was increased to 27 million acres and includes 2 million acres for grassland to provide more flexibility for grazing. It also reduced county rental rates and incentive payments.

It allows CRP to target the most sensitive lands without tying up land for beginning farmers and ranchers, he said.

The bill increases funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and makes changes to the Conservation Stewardship Program to make it more attractive and provide better funding for projects, he said.

In the area of trade, the bill retains most of the major marketing programs with \$255 million annually. It also creates some baseline funding for those programs, which is important so they can continue in the next farm bill, he said.



Andrew Walmsley

Dairy markets dampen hay outlook

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

BURLEY, Idaho — It was a good growing year in the West for hay producers. Idaho's alfalfa hay production increased 19 percent year over year and was 14 percent higher than the five-year average.

That made a lot of good-quality hay available and took a lot of feeder hay out of the markets, Steve Hines, Jerome County extension educator, told producers during the annual University of Idaho outlook seminar Dec. 12.

Nationwide, production was up 8 percent. Stocks of all hay are up, and disappearance is down. High supply and low demand doesn't help prices, he said.

"Idaho and its neighbors are carrying quite a bit of hay," he said.

Stocks of all hay on farms in Idaho, Washington and Oregon were up 10 percent on May 1, and a few factors might keep more stocks than usual on the farm, he said.

The forecasted warmer, drier winter in the region could result in less hay being fed to livestock. Struggling dairies are using less hay in their rations, and Chinese retaliatory tariffs are taking a toll on exports, he said.

Dairy is a price-setter in south-central Idaho, and the dairy industry is in a bind. Dairy farmers aren't stock-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

Nationwide, hay production was up 8 percent this year. Stocks of all hay are up, and disappearance is down. High supply and low demand doesn't help prices, Steve Hines, Jerome County extension educator, says.

piling hay as they have in the past. They're feeding less hay and using more alternatives, and they might not switch back, he said.

USDA is forecasting improved domestic demand for hay in 2019. So hay sales might go up but in this region, it's going to depend on what happens in the dairy industry, he said.

"As milk goes, so goes hay," he said.

Milk prices are below break-even, and cow numbers are declining. Substitute feed prices are low, and substitute feed stocks are high although falling, he said.

In addition, hay production is forecast higher in 2019, with good stocks on hand, he said.

On top of that, the trade war with China has increased tariffs to 30 percent on imports of U.S. alfalfa and 32 percent on imports of U.S. grass hay, he said.

"Hay exports were really strong until the trade wars," he said.

Over the past five years, U.S. hay exports to China grew 183 percent, but suppliers report those exports are down 20 percent to 40 percent, he said.

"China is far and away our largest export trading partner.

If you're tied to the export market, you're tied into what's going on in China," he said.

Chinese dairy producers are making supply adjustments and will feed alternative feeds, and there's a risk that those new arrangements will solidify. If the trade war goes on very long, the U.S. could lose the market to other suppliers or alternative feeds, he said.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is the bright spot, and U.S. hay exports there will continue to grow. The country has stopped using water to irrigate alfalfa to conserve water.

Ag employers seek last-minute relief from wage increases

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

Efforts by the National Council of Agricultural Employers to freeze the 2018 minimum wage for H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers next year have gained support, but time is running out.

Congress will likely adjourn Dec. 21 and if appropriations bills with a freeze amendment haven't passed that leaves the issue to possible intervention by the secretaries of USDA or Labor.

Neither department has responded yet to NCAE's Nov. 28 letter asking for the freeze, Michael Marsh, the organization's president and CEO, said Dec. 17.

The appropriations bills are tied up in a stalemate between the White House and Congress over funding for a border wall. The dispute could result in a partial government shut down.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Roberto Hinojosa Fernandez, an H-2A picker, clips stems on Fuji apples at Valicoff Orchards, Wapato, Wash., on Oct. 17. Agricultural employers are trying to convince Congress to freeze wages for foreign guestworkers to avoid a huge increase slated for next year.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., has authored an amendment to freeze the H-2A minimum hourly wage, known as the Adverse Effect Wage Rate or AEWR. An NCAE letter supporting that amendment has

now been signed by 76 other agricultural associations and 57 farms and businesses, Marsh said.

Based on USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service data released Nov. 15, the

AEWR is estimated to increase 6.3 percent nationwide and 16 percent, 23 percent and 15 percent in three regions of the Mountain West. Washington and Oregon would go from \$14.12 to \$15.03 per hour, the highest in the nation.

Such increases would be "devastating" to some farms given the increase in hourly earnings for all U.S. employment is 2.8 percent and crop prices are level or decreasing from prior years, Marsh said.

The Department of Labor usually would be setting the 2019 AEWRs on Dec. 21 to be effective at the start of the new year, Marsh said.

"The best solution for us would be for the government not to shut down and the Sen. Tillis amendment to be adopted. Then we have surety from a legislative standpoint of direction given to DOL for a temporary hold," Marsh said.

Research co-op lands third grant to develop organic veggies

OSU breeder leads multi-state program

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — For the third time in nine years, the USDA will fund a multi-state research program dedicated to breeding new cultivars of vegetables specially adapted for organic farms.

The Northern Organic Vegetable Improvement Cooperative, or NOVIC, started in 2009 with a \$2 million grant from the Organic Research and Extension Initiative, part

of the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. It received a second \$2 million grant in 2014, and was once again awarded \$2 million earlier this year.

Jim Myers, a plant breeder and professor of horticulture at Oregon State University, serves as project director for NOVIC, a collaboration of breeders and farmers who work together on developing new organic varieties. Other research partners include the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Cornell University, the Organic Seed Alliance in Port Townsend, Wash., and USDA Agricultural Research Service Plant Genetic Resources Unit

in Geneva, N.Y.

Myers said it is extremely rare for a project to be funded three times by the USDA, which goes to show the quality and impact of their work.

"It's nice to have the continuity, to have a long run like this," Myers said. "We have a lot of things in the pipeline and they're looking at us to finish them."

Myers' research focuses on tomatoes — specifically, finding varieties that are resistant to late blight and other diseases. The co-op is also performing variety trials on sweet corn, winter squash, peppers and cabbage, targeting resilience to insects and weeds.

Organic crops cannot be raised with conventional fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. Myers said organic growers need robust and stable varieties, able to tolerate conditions and fend off pests or diseases that would normally be controlled with spraying.

"You're trying to use natural inputs, and have a fairly closed system so there's not a lot coming from the outside," he said.

NOVIC trials have already resulted in a number of new releases alongside grower partners, such as the "Iron Lady" and "Brandywine" tomatoes, "Honeynut" squash and "Solstice" broccoli.