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Our View

Wage hike for blueberry pickers should not stand

A federal judge has put a temporary stay on a 50% wage hike the Department of Labor had ordered for blueberry pickers.

In arguing against the order and that the hike should go through, the government once again demonstrated a thorough lack of understanding about agriculture and economics.

Zirkle Fruit is a large fruit producer. This season it has 1,900 domestic and H-2A workers. The DOL approved the company's H-2A applications this year with a wage for blueberry pickers of 50 cents per pound.

On July 24, Zirkle received a DOL notice that the state's prevailing wage for blueberry harvest had increased from 50 cents to 75 cents per pound based on state Employment Security Department wage surveys.

The company filed suit Aug. 7. It said the wage hike would increase



Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

A federal judge has clamped a temporary halt on a government-mandated 50% wage increase for blueberry pickers.

the cost of harvesting the 5 million pounds of berries still in the field by as much as \$1.4 million when breaks and added payroll taxes were taken into account.

"Enforcing an unprecedented wage jump rate like this would cause plaintiff to suffer a sudden, unsustainable and financially calamitous increase in

labor costs in the middle of harvest," Zirkle's complaint said. "This increase will wipe out virtually any and all anticipated profit."

The government argued that Zirkle's profit wasn't relevant in the case. To cover the hike, the government claimed during a hearing last week, Zirkle needed only to increase the price of its blueberries.

The government continues to believe that farmers are price makers instead of price takers. Zirkle's buyers would go elsewhere if the price went up 25 cents a pound. It's the nature of the market.

Profit is always relevant. Zirkle doesn't exist to employ pickers. It's in business to make a profit and employs pickers to accomplish that goal. That's Capitalism 101. When it becomes cheaper to automate picking, pickers will lose their jobs. Zirkle says that if the wage hike stands, it will switch to

mechanical harvesting.

To his credit, Judge Salvador Mendoza Jr. has a better grasp than the government of how business works. "Is Zirkle in this as a hobby?" he asked rhetorically.

Indeed, it is not.

The fruit industry is at odds with the methods used by the state Employment Security Department to determine prevailing wages. There's no good way to determine average costs because there are so many variables.

Growers who rely on H-2A workers have to hire those employees before the state has determined that prevailing wage. The DOL signs off on a proposed wage in January, but can raise it in July after the work is already in progress. What better example could there be to demonstrate the government's lack of understanding?

The wage hike should not stand.

Our View



Capital Press File

Fairs bring people to gather for fun, entertainment — and learning about country living.

Fairs and bridges

Maybe you go to the fair for the food. After all, who could resist a peanut butter and jelly pickle dog, or deep-fried Nutella custard stuffed French toast?

Along with all of the culinary delights, fairs offer something new for everyone.

And that's the point.

Among all of the consternation over the rural-urban divide, there is a bright spot — the many county and state fairs that take place each year throughout the nation.

Whether you're at the the Texas State Fair in Dallas, which draws 2.2 million visitors each year, or head north to the Tanana Valley State Fair in Fairbanks, Alaska, or south to the Manatee County Fair in Palmetto, Fla., you'll get a heaping helping of country living.

More than anything else, these fairs allow agriculture to shine, and animals are often the stars of the show. Dairy and beef cattle, hogs, sheep and goats, poultry, horses, llamas — you name it — are all on display for everyone to see.

The animals are fascinating to watch close up, but talking with the adults and youths who raise them reveals a passion and depth of knowledge you won't find anywhere else. Whether they are FFA or 4-H members or breeders, they readily

answer any questions that might arise.

All a person has to do is ask about milking a goat or caring for longhorn cattle or keeping bees and he or she will get the straight story. It won't be filtered through a public relations firm or a special interest group angling to make political points.

They are so disarmingly engaging, knowledgeable and downright enjoyable to talk with that anyone can learn a thing or two.

The result is a connection with people, livestock and the country life that previously doesn't exist anywhere else.

The beauty of a fair is it provides neutral ground for people to talk, get their questions answered and see for themselves how big a draft horse is or how small a chick is. The lucky ones might get to see the miracle of life — a calf being born or an egg hatching.

For adults and children alike, nothing can top that.

When we talk about the rural-urban divide, it's the county and state fairs that provide a bridge that brings everyone together.

Once a year, everyone who attends a county or state fair can appreciate the joys of country living.

And learn about each other in an unfiltered and authentic way found nowhere else.

Carbon farming and climate

If we are to lower atmospheric carbon levels, farmers will have a big part to play — written as Amazon fires burn.

Carbon can be (has been) taken from the earth, carbon can be returned to the earth.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of years of carbon is suddenly being released in the Amazon.

This on top of what was already too much carbon being sent skyward around the world.

It appears likely we are fomenting warmer and more extreme weather. Tipping points, where change becomes more sudden, are at least possible. It is prudent to bring carbon levels down.

If carbon is pumped into the sky, carbon can be captured and brought back to the earth.

If we are to lower atmospheric carbon levels, farmers and other land managers are going to have to take a big part.

Carbon can be sequestered into the land and used to grow new life. It will take changes in how we farm, ranch and manage forests, rivers and oceans, but plant-covered soils can draw down carbon from the atmosphere into the earth.

Some plants do better than others.

Some of the methods are well known. Cover crops, minimized tillage, hedge rows, swales, expanded rotations, plant development each play a small part.

Forest slash can be buried or made into biochar, a soil amendment.

GUEST VIEW

Jonathan Spero



This is only the beginning. We have a lot to learn. We need to figure out how to manage the land in a carbon-positive way. The emerging fields of agro-ecology and restoration agriculture are among those looking for solutions.

We have to consider the economy. Our current agriculture has been developed to be economically efficient at producing food and fiber. Commodities are cheap. That was the goal.

To keep carbon from the air and to farm carbon into the soil is a whole other variable, and an expense, at least in the short run.

Farmers removing carbon from the atmosphere somehow need to get compensated for this service.

But carbon capture is possible, and compared with the alternatives, not that expensive.

Yes, it is a lot to place on the farmer, rancher or forester. Feeding and providing for people is hard enough.

Making it pay is even harder. But no one wants a world that continues to get warmer.

We can and must learn to produce food and fiber while sequestering carbon from the air.

Jonathan Spero is a farmer near Grants Pass, Ore.

About that local control idea for managing wolves ...

As a native western Washingtonian, I have to say I am picking up what you were putting down in your editorial, "Local control for predators."

I read along and suddenly realized you were talking about a policy only dreamt about over here, why I almost spat out my latte! I didn't, of course, but was led to put pen to paper to wholeheartedly agree with you.

Now, goodness knows I don't live on Fifth Avenue but I do live in North Bend, Wash. We do see

GUEST VIEW

Melissa Grant



bears and cougars quite regularly and wolves only occasionally. We lose livestock and our fair share of small dogs and cats but, I'll agree, predators aren't our biggest problem. Still if local control is now going to be a statewide policy, I'm on board.

I'm ready to "manage" what some of us Westerners see as our biggest

foes: deer, elk and cattle. I know, right? These are the very things Eastern Washingtonians are trying to protect from the big bad wolf but hear me out.

Sips latte

If we're talking danger to humans in our state; bears, wolves and cougars barely figure into the equation. Shockingly, cattle and horses come out on top in the "danger to humans" category. I say take them out! If those hoofed hooligans can't respect me and my yoga mat, we just don't need them around.

Would you believe deer are deadlier than sharks, alligators, bears and rattlesnakes combined? The WSDOT tracks deer-car collisions and numbers suggest that a minimum of 5,000 collisions with deer and 200 collisions with elk occur each year. Nationally the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that there are about 1 million car crashes annually that involve deer, killing about 200 people in the process. The average property damage is about \$3,305 per accident. It seems to

me that eliminating our western Washington deer would save us a lot of money. Sure, the hunting opportunities would plummet but since hunters are a graying population, we need to get creative with our bloodthirsty hooved wild things.

After all, not only are they killing us and making us crash our cars, they devour plantings, saplings and crops. They cause nearly \$1 billion in farm, garden and timber damage. One deer can consume up to a ton and a half of greenery per year. Which,

by over browsing, threatens bird habitats.

Lastly, these marauding herbivores are carriers for Lyme and Chronic Wasting Disease. Which some researchers say might soon be a threat to the human population. So, yeah, kill all the predators who might help control the deer and elk populations. We'll return the favor by getting all hooved animals who may cause us harm. Do it for the cattle because they love us and would never hurt us. Wait....

Melissa Grant lives in North Bend, Wash.