Departing Ecology director to ag: 'Thank you for taking a chance on me'

Industry: Bellon's exit 'loss' for agriculture

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Maia Bellon, the director of Washington's Department of Ecology, has announced her plans to step down at the end of the year.

Bellon worked in state service for 25 years and was director of Ecology for nearly seven years.

In a statement, Bellon called the decision "bittersweet," but said she's confident that it's the right time to make a professional and personal change.

"My current plans are to enjoy some time off reconnecting with my family and friends," she stated. "I then intend to dust off my law degree and try my hand at private practice focusing on environmental law and policy."

"It's going to be a real loss for agriculture," said Toni Meacham, rancher and attorney in Connell, Wash., and the Washington Cattlemen's Association water ecology chairwoman. "Not to say she hasn't been tough on ag. She has. That's her job and she tried her best to make sure anybody she feels was accountable was held accountable."

Meacham represents the cattlemen on Ecology's agriculture and the water quality advisory committee, which Bellon formed in 2014.

Meacham also represented rancher Joe Lemire in a landmark case against Ecology. In 2009, prior to Bellon's arrival, Ecology issued an order claiming Lemire's cattle had "substantial potential to pollute" and ordering him to fence them out of nearby Pataha Creek.

The state Supreme Court in 2013 ruled in favor of the department, saying Ecology was not required to show that conditions on Lemire's 29-cattle ranch polluted the creek. Lemire died in May 2018.

When she came on board, Bellon opened the lines of communication between agriculture and the department, Meacham said. The committee has provided a good venue for ranchers to express concerns to the department, she said, even though Bellon is still constrained by the law and requirements of Gov. Jay Inslee.

Maia Bellon

"You never felt like you were just talking to yourself," Meacham said. "I definitely have always felt that she was listening. She might not have always agreed, but she did hear the concerns that we had."

In an email to members, Bellon said she believed the committee had been "vital" in many ways — "mostly for mending broken relationships and establishing mutual trust. I want to personally thank all of you, especially the founding members, for your commitment to collaboration and partnerships. Together, we have made progress on clean water."

Ballon added in her email that she hoped the committee would continue to meet and build upon "successful outcomes" previously accomplished.

"Until our paths cross again, I wish you all the best, and I thank you for taking a chance on me," she stated.

"Maia has been a true proponent of working relationships, collaborative approaches and has been one to reach out to agriculture to try to create solutions," said Paterson, Wash., wheat farmer Nicole Berg, one of the founding members of the committee. "She was a true listener and a problem solver."

Berg said she hopes Bellon's replacement has the same approach to outreach and agriculture.

"She has a true commitment to the environment, as us farmers do, and I always appreciated that about her," Berg said.

Brad Carlson/Capital Press

Panelist Truman Kohtz, left, speaks with Aaron Phillips of the seed company Syngenta Dec. 3 during part of the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Seed Association Winter Convention. The convention was held in Boise Dec. 2-4.

Panel: Seed industry resilient, innovative despite challenges

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

The local seed industry will remain strong despite challenges such as population growth, a labor shortage and international competition, panelists said at the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Seed Association winter convention Dec. 3.

The area is one of the world's major seed producers thanks to its dry climate and cool nights — which aid growth while limiting pest and disease pressure — and substantial irrigation infrastructure that provides growers an additional precision-management tool. IEOSA said the region produces more than 50 seed species and many more varieties.

Private-sector and university scientists have kept local seed companies innovative, customer-focused and able to capitalize on local advantages, panelists said. They addressed how the local industry has evolved.

"It's going to be there," Jess Bice, retired from Forage Genetics, said of the industry. "It's going to be a challenge, but that future is there. The stewardship is going to be all-important."

Growth, and encroachment by other uses, reduce farmland supply and the availability of larger parcels desired for some types of seed production, he said.

Tim Primus, recently retired from Syngenta, said he hopes current local initiatives to curb urbanization continue, and "smart" growth is prioritized.

"Taking acres away is a big concern," he said.

Meanwhile, the ongoing labor shortage in agriculture is a huge burden on the seed industry, Primus said.

"We're going to see continued mechanization," he said. "Mechanization needs to continue to advance."

Technology and tech-derived information are available to seed companies of all sizes, Primus said. A diverse workforce broadens the knowledge base and bodes well for continued innovation.

Truman Kohtz, who is retired from HM Clause, said scientists continue to advance the industry while focusing on what the market demands. He urged companies to protect inputs when producing internationally, such as by stationing someone at the site full-time.

Bice said many more seed crops are grown in southern Idaho and eastern Oregon compared to 40-plus years ago.

"The diversification has been dramatic over the years," he said. "And there is likely more to come."

Organic growers, for example, will demand more seed, Bice said.

Economist talks crop insurance

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

SPOKANE — Farmers should consider whether they have more risk on prices or yields when deciding to enroll in a national crop insurance program, a small grains economist says.

Farmers must decide between the Agriculture Loss Coverage-County (ARC-CO) program or the Price Loss Coverage (PLC) insurance programs.

PLC is best when price is a grower's biggest risk and yields don't change much, and ARC-CO is best when revenue is the biggest risk, said Randy Fortenbery, small grains economist at Washington State University.

Most farmers signed up for ARC-CO in 2014 because they thought wheat prices would never fall below $5 per bushel, Fortenbery said. Once they did, PLC would have generated larger payments than ARC.

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

Randy Fortenbery, small grains economist at Washington State University, advises farmers to consider where they face the most risk before signing up for crop insurance.

Under the 2014 Farm Bill, ARC-CO would have paid $43.29 per acre in Washington's Franklin County, compared to a PLC payment of $79.62 per acre, he said.

Farmers previously had to sign up for the entire duration of the Farm Bill. That lack of flexibility ended up costing Washington roughly $200 million in 2016, Fortenbery said. He did not update the cost for later years.

"Producers weren't getting the full benefit of the program they would have gotten if they'd been able to switch," he said.

Farmers now have to sign up for the same program for 2019 and 2020, but then can make an annual election to switch after that, Fortenbery said. If they fail to sign up, by default they go to the program they were last signed up for.

Fortenbery expects most farmers to switch from ARC-CO to PLC for the first two years.

The program previously used yields from USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, but now use USDA Risk Management Agency county average yields.

Yields can vary in some locations, Fortenbery said. For example, farmers in Stevens County will see wheat yields go up by at least 10 bushels per acre and Benton County growers will see wheat yields go down a similar amount.

County data will be publicly available.

Idaho House Minority leader resigns

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Idaho House Minority Leader Mat Erpelding, who served on agriculture and natural-resources committees, has resigned to take a job as Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce vice president of government and community relations.

Mat Erpelding

Erpelding, D-Boise, owns Idaho Mountain Guides and is an adjunct professor in the Boise State University College of Innovation and Design.

He represents District 19 that includes north and northwest Boise. He was first elected to the House in 2012 and has served as minority leader since 2017. He served on House Agricultural Affairs, Resources and Conservation, Revenue and Taxation, and Ways and Means committees during the 2019 legislative session.

Erpelding, 44, took a broad approach to his work on Ag Affairs and Resources and Conservation committees.

"I built really strong relationships with my Republican colleagues, and advocates on both sides," he said in an interview. "I tried to clearly understand the issues and do what's best. There were times where District 19 was not impacted, but other districts were going to be. I really tried to do my best for the state of Idaho, and I think the ag groups saw that. And we built a strong relationship."