

H-2A minimum wage reduction under consideration

By **DAN WHEAT**
For the Capital Press

The federal government apparently is discussing lowering the minimum wage for H-2A-visa agricultural foreign guestworkers because of the COVID-19 crisis, says Michael Marsh, president and CEO of the National Council of Agricultural Employers.

“Apparently there is some discussion between USDA and the U.S. Department of Labor, but I would be surprised that absent any rule making that it would take place because they would probably be sued either by labor advocates or folks on the right,” Marsh said.

The possibility of a reduction in the AEWR — the acronym for the Adverse Effect Wage Rate — for H-2A

guestworkers was reported April 16 by Tucker Carlson on Fox News. Carlson opined against it, saying agricultural jobs should go to newly unemployed Americans.

The difficulty with that, Marsh said, is most Americans don’t want to do agricultural work because it’s physically demanding and outdoors.

Marsh said a California tomato grower this week saw an uptick in Americans looking for work. But out of the 26 applicants, 24 didn’t pass a drug test and of the two that were offered work, one didn’t show up and the other quit after half a day.

Marsh said he didn’t know if other agricultural groups are seeking a reduction in the AEWR.

Paul Schlegel, vice pres-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

Discussions may be underway in the federal government to reduce the minimum wage paid to H-2A guestworkers.

ident of public affairs at the American Farm Bureau Federation, said it’s important to address the AEWR at a time when labor-intensive produce farms have lost much of their markets due to COVID-19.

“The closing of restaurants, hotels and tourism is

forcing farmers to plow under their fields to cut their losses,” Schlegel said. “Asking farmers to pay artificially high wages at a time when their own income has largely evaporated due to the COVID-19 pandemic is not right.”

AFBF has long supported

efforts to remedy the AEWR which is calculated on “flawed survey data,” causing dramatic annual increases, he said.

NCAE has previously sued and petitioned DOL to halt dramatic AEWR increases in 2019. DOL sets the AEWR annually based on prevailing wages. It is intended to keep wages of foreign workers high enough that they don’t adversely effect wages and employment of domestic workers.

DOL has never met the criteria of determining a need and just defaults to annual AEWR increases, which results in a never-ending upward spiral of foreign and domestic agricultural wages, causing some growers to go out of business, Marsh said.

The AEWR went up 5.32% on Jan. 2 in Oregon and Wash-

ington, from \$15.03 to \$15.83 per hour, the highest in the nation.

In comparison, the Oregon state minimum wage is \$11.25 an hour and \$12.50 in the Portland metro area. Washington’s is \$13.50.

The national average AEWR is \$13.99 per hour, up 5.58%. It increased 6.3% in January of 2019 and increased 22.8% in Nevada, Utah and Colorado at that time.

Such increases have been double or triple the annual average increases of agricultural and non-agricultural domestic workers, are costing farms hundreds of millions of dollars and are forcing some out of business, Marsh said.

It’s a huge issue for Washington tree fruit growers heavily dependent on H-2A workers.

Pacific Power proposing 10% rate increase for irrigation customers

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

PORTLAND — One of Oregon’s largest electric utilities is seeking a 10% rate increase for irrigation customers in part to help pay for more renewable energy and transmission upgrades.

Pacific Power submitted its request for a general rate revi-

sion to the Oregon Public Utility Commission on Feb. 14. The PUC held public hearings by telephone and video conference on April 2 and 13 to discuss the proposal. New rates would not go into effect until 2021.

The timing, however, is not ideal as the coronavirus pandemic has shuttered non-essential businesses, helping to drive down commodity prices while

farmers and ranchers face labor shortages and supply chain disruptions.

Overall, Pacific Power wants to raise rates by an average of 1.6%, collecting an additional \$21.6 million per year. Most residential customers would pay an extra \$4.03 on their monthly bills, the utility says.

It is nonetheless a diffi-

cult request given the circumstances, as nearly 300,000 Oregonians have filed for unemployment over the four weeks ending April 11, according to the latest figures from the state Employment Department.

“Clearly, these proposals were made before COVID-19 was on anyone’s radar,” said Tom Gauntt, a Pacific Power spokesman. “We know that the

disruption and pain caused by the virus will play a part in this ongoing process.”

The rate hike for Pacific Power’s 7,984 irrigation customers in Oregon would be even steeper — 10% — according to the PUC filing. Gauntt said this would be partially offset by a projected 4.6% decrease in fuel costs, thanks to wider adoption of

cheaper renewable energy like wind, solar and hydro power.

Irrigators could also lower their costs through a new program aimed at shifting their energy usage to off-peak hours. For example, Gauntt said farmers could save as much as 8% by not turning on their pumps from 2 to 6 p.m. or 6 to 10 p.m., and shifting usage to a different time of their choosing.



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