

Washington proposes COVID-19 rules for migrant housing

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Social distancing will apply to farmworker housing, limiting the use of bunk beds and requiring growers to isolate workers suspected of having COVID-19 under emergency rules being considered by the Washington Department of Labor and Industries.

L&I circulated the rules April 23 for a brief comment period, lasting through Monday. The department said it planned to adopt the rules the first week of May.

“These are rules, and they would be enforced like any other existing safety and health rule,” L&I spokesman Frank Ameduri said in an email.

Growers will have to react quickly to the regulations, Washington State Tree Fruit Association President Jon DeVaney said. “That’s how emergencies are.”

Businesses such as farms, deemed essential under Gov. Jay Inslee’s stay-at-home order, must still take precautions against the coronavirus spreading among their workers. L&I issued workplace regulations for farms and food processors last week, along with sugges-



Dan Wheat/For the Capital Press

A bunk room at the Riverview Meadows Wafra farmworker housing in Okanogan, Wash., last October. Top bunks could not be used under rules proposed by the state.

tions for meeting the mandatory requirements.

The proposed rules for migrant farmworker housing would require occupants be 6 feet apart while sleeping, cooking, eating, bathing and washing. Plastic shields could be used between fixtures, such as sinks, where occupants may be closer for a short period.

Beds would have to be 6 feet apart, with occupants sleeping head to toe, and only the lower berths of bunk beds could be occupied. Farms could modify the requirements with “engineering or administrative controls” approved by L&I and the health department.

L&I is concerned about virus droplets falling onto the lower bunk, Ameduri said. “With droplet transmission, there is also a concern for buildup of droplets on surfaces around and below,” he said. “By not having people sleep on the top bunk, we reduce the risk of exposure to the lower bed occupant.”

Barriers between beds may be an option, according to L&I. “There may be others that (housing) operators can come up with, and they can submit those proposals for approval,” Ameduri said.

L&I is aware the rules may mean farms can house fewer workers, but has not estimated how

PROPOSED HOUSING RULES

Here are more details on the proposed housing rules:

- Workers must be educated on how to prevent contracting COVID-19 and what to do if they develop symptoms.
- Social distancing would not apply to sleeping rooms occupied by one family.
- Visiting between buildings would be discouraged to minimize cross-contamination in case of an illness.
- Surfaces must be disinfected regularly, and workers provided with cleaning supplies and instructions.
- Farms must notify local health officers of suspected COVID-19 cases and drive workers to be treated. People transporting ill workers must wear personal-protection equipment.

Public comments on the draft rule will be accepted through April 27 at housing@doh.wa.gov and cynthia.ireland@lni.wa.gov. The departments are scheduled to publish a final emergency rule on May 1 for 120 days.

The draft rule maybe viewed at: https://www.lni.wa.gov/rulemaking-activity/AO20-09/2009DraftLanguage04232020.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

many, he said.

DeVaney said farmers may have to be creative to house as many workers as before.

“It (rules) will have a big impact, but the question is, What kind of administrative and engineering controls can you put forward and how quickly could L&I approve that?” he said.

Washington Growers League Executive Director

Mike Gempler said banning bunk beds could cut housing capacity in half. “That would be extremely devastating,” he said.

L&I also proposes to allow farmworkers to be housed in tents, now reserved for the short and labor-intensive cherry harvest.

The tents would have to be built to current standards. The tents must have floors, windows, electricity, at least

50 square feet per occupant and no more than 15 occupants. DeVaney said the tents are neither inexpensive nor quick to put up.

Workers with or suspected of having COVID-19 would have to be isolated. Farmers would have to provide food and water and monitor the safety of isolated workers or ensure those services are being provided elsewhere, such as at a local health department quarantine facility.

One grower, who requested anonymity, said there’s discussion of suing the governor, the departments and the unions — who sued the departments to impose such rules— for hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

Rob Valicoff, president of Valicoff Fruit Co. in Wapato, said he doesn’t know what changes he will have to make at housing on his orchard or at the FairBridge Inn, in Yakima, booked full for about 800 H-2A workers at peak harvest. Valicoff is a co-owner of the hotel.

“The industry has invested millions of dollars in housing and now it’s cut in half, maybe more,” he said.

Dan Wheat contributed to this story.

Onion industry seeks federal aid

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Onion producers in Oregon and Idaho seek payment from USDA’s recently announced relief program.

Industry groups in an April 20 letter to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue asked that, “when you consider how to distribute the \$2.1 billion for agricultural producers impacted by COVID-19 that you would provide direct relief and payments to the onion growers and shippers of Idaho and Eastern Oregon.”

The letter cited concerns “that without some kind of assistance, the growers and shippers will see disasters beyond anything they have previously experienced.”

Malheur County (Ore.) Onion Growers Association President Paul Skeen, Idaho Onion Growers Association President Dell Winegar and Idaho-Oregon Fruit and Vegetable Association President Brad Watson signed the letter. They did not say how much money the industry seeks.

Southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho supply about 45% of the onions consumed in the U.S. from mid-August to April, when the area’s approximately 35 shippers are busiest. Most of the onions go to foodservice. The crop typically ranges from 20,000 to 24,000 acres.

USDA on April 17 announced the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, including \$16 billion in direct financial support based on losses tied to COVID-19 price and supply-chain impacts. Payments for specialty crops are to total \$2.1 billion. A producer can receive \$125,000 per commodity, up to a maximum of \$250,000.

Skeen said in an interview that the region has 160 to 200 active onion farmers depending on how they’re counted. It’s unlikely a producer will receive the maximum payment allowed given stiff competition among various commodities for limited resources, so the industry wanted to inform Perdue promptly.

Recent sharp sales declines likely will impact onion growers and shippers in the region into the fall, he said.



Idaho, Malheur County Onion Growers

Southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho comprise one of the nation’s largest onion-growing regions.

Most of the 2020 crop was planted before COVID-19 impacts were known, and in favorable conditions that suggested strong prospective yields. Area processors cut pre-season contracts by 35 to 45% and foodservice business is reduced by 50 to 75%, the letter said, “leaving growers with a crop that is planted that likely can’t be marketed.”

“It could be as many as 1,500 to 2,000 acres planted that do not have a home,” Skeen said.

The letter said business was down significantly on COVID-19 fears before mandatory restaurant closures and stay-at-home orders. Afterward, “this area experienced a period of high demand as retailers scrambled to replenish shelves of fresh produce and just about anything else as consumers panicked and cleaned stores out. That increase in demand only lasted about 10 days, and since, business has fallen as much as 75%.”

Loss of orders late in the marketing season forced growers to sell onions at a loss or give them away, the letter said. One shipper reported plans to dump about 5% of overall production, and customers have reduced business by as much as 95%. Prices below breakeven are anticipated over the next year.

Skeen said the industry faces challenges apart from COVID-19, such as recently higher imports that reduce prices.

“If this area doesn’t get help, and fast, the outlook for one of the most famous onion regions in the nation is bleak,” he said.

Researchers studying risk of COVID-19 in treated sewage

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Every day, trucks carrying tons of treated sewage from the city of Portland arrive at rural farms in Eastern Oregon where the material is spread as a nutrient-rich fertilizer on the region’s sprawling wheat fields and grass pastures.

Using municipal waste to grow heartier crops is nothing new in agriculture, but as the COVID-19 pandemic has left more than 2,000 Oregonians sickened and 78 dead as of April 21, communities are growing concerned about whether it may be a pathway for infection.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the novel coronavirus has been found in the feces of some patients. However, there is no evidence so far of transmission from sewer systems.

Scientists are just beginning to study whether the virus is present in sewage after undergoing anaerobic digestion — the process of turning raw waste into beneficial bio-solids. Based on past research focused on different strains of coronavirus, public health and environmental regulators believe the risk is low.

“I feel confident there is a very low risk for this to be a viable exposure pathway,” said Pat Heins,

program coordinator for bio-solids and water reuse at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

City to farm

DEQ permits more than 200 facilities statewide that produce bio-solids for farms and ranches, including the city of Portland at its Columbia Boulevard Wastewater Treatment Plant.

In 2018, the city processed 7,930 dry tons of bio-solids for land application, of which 5,792 tons were sent to Madison Ranches about 10 miles south of Hermiston, Ore., Eastern Oregon’s largest city. Madison Ranches spread the material over 1,822 acres of permanent dryland pasture.

The rest went to wheat farmers in nearby Sherman County. Another 1,206 dry tons of bio-solids was also sent to a Wasco County landfill.

Greg Charr, bio-solids program manager for the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services, described the process as a model for sustainability. Sewage comes into the treatment plant, where it is held in one of 10 anaerobic digesters for up to four weeks and heated to a minimum of 95 degrees Fahrenheit.

Microorganisms chew up and break down the sludge, reducing pathogens

and making it less attractive for other disease-spreading vectors such as insects, rodents and birds. The leftover material, defined as a Class B bio-solid, is a valuable soil amendment for raising crops and livestock.

“It improves your soil’s ability and structure to hold water and nutrients,” Charr said.

The city began partnering with Madison Ranches 30 years ago to apply bio-solids on pastureland.

Jake Madison, president of the fourth-generation farm, said no employees have ever gotten sick from handling bio-solids.

“None of our employees have been sick, and we work with this stuff everyday,” Madison said. “We haven’t seen any issues with it on our end.”

Study underway

But the COVID-19 outbreak is something entirely new. A study recently funded at the University of Arizona aims to determine if the strain of coronavirus that causes COVID-19 can survive in digested sewage, and if so, for how long.

Ian Pepper, an environmental microbiologist and director of the university’s Water and Energy Sustainable Technology Center, said they will be physically handling samples of the virus during lab tests, spiking sewage with it and digesting sewage.

Craft brewers see demand plunge amid virus closures

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Craft-beer revenues plunged on COVID-19 concerns, impacting the industry as well as the farmers who supply it with hops and barley.

The Brewers Association

in an early April survey of craft brewers found on-site sales had dropped by 65% — eased slightly by new drive-up and delivery sales — and fell by more than 90% in distributed draft as bars and other outlets were closed.

Sales to retailers rose

15-20% as consumers stocked up.

Bart Watson, the association’s chief economist, said the outlook is uncertain “since we don’t know what re-opening looks like.”

“I’ve seen some analysts suggest that on-premise is going to stay down 50% for many more months even if it partially re-opens,” he said. “Beyond that, we’re all just guessing.”

NOTICE OF BUDGET HEARING

Notice is hereby given that a public hearing will be held pursuant to ORS 576.416 (5), on Thursday, May 28, 2020, at 8:00 a.m. via Zoom Meeting or call, upon a proposed budget for operation of the Oregon Tall Fescue Commission during the fiscal year July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021. At this hearing any producer of Oregon-grown Tall Fescue seed has a right to be heard with respect to the proposed budget, a copy of which is available for public inspection, under reasonable circumstances, in the office of each County Extension Agent in Oregon. For further information, contact the Tall Fescue Commission business office, P.O. Box 3366, Salem, Oregon 97302, telephone 503-364-2944. The meeting location is accessible to persons with disabilities. Please make any requests for an interpreter for the hearing impaired or for other accommodation for persons with disabilities at least 48 hours before the meeting by contacting the Commission office at 503-364-2944.

LEGAL

Notice of Oregon Strawberry Commission Public Budget Hearing

NOTICE HEREBY IS GIVEN that a public meeting will be held pursuant to ORS 576, the Oregon Strawberry Commission Statue, by ZOOM video conference on Wednesday May 13, 2020, at 1:00 pm upon a proposed budget for the operation of the Oregon Strawberry Commission during Fiscal Year July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021.

At this meeting, any producer of strawberries in Oregon has the right to be heard with respect to the proposed budget, a copy of which is available for inspection, under reasonable circumstances, in the Oregon Strawberry Commission office in Portland. Any producer of strawberries in Oregon may join this conference call by calling toll free 1-253-215-8782. Participant login number is 379 063 6110.

For further information, contact the Oregon Strawberry Commission office at 1827 NE 44th Ave., Ste 315, Portland, Oregon 97213. 503-274-5458

Dated this 21st Day of April 2020

ATTESTED: Matt Unger. Chairman

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