



# Capital Press

EMPOWERING PRODUCERS OF FOOD & FIBER

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## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The White House  
Getty Images

### FARMERS TELL PRESIDENT BIDEN THEIR HOPES, FEARS

By MATTHEW WEAVER • Capital Press

**R**ICE, Wash. — “Pretty worried.” That’s how Rice, Wash., rancher Scott Nielsen answers when asked his thoughts on the Joe Biden presidency.

Nielsen is one of 2 million U.S. farmers and ranchers who will be watching Biden’s decisions closely in the next four years. His concerns include regulations, environmental issues, running cattle on national forest land and gun control.

The Capital Press asked several farmers and ranchers to imagine they were sitting across a table from Biden. What would they tell the new president, if given that chance?

Some were cordial. Others were skeptical. Still others didn’t respond at all. And a few refrained from writing, saying the words they’d use wouldn’t be appropriate to print in a newspaper.

Others expressed willingness to work with Biden and his administration, reminding him that their livelihoods are at stake.

Here, in their own words, are messages to Biden from farmers and ranchers.

#### CATTLE

**A**s an independent cattle producer I am asking for help from the federal government. Independent cattle producers are self-reliant folks who seldom ask for help.

As an independent cattle producer I am part of the food supply that feeds the American people. I produce a safe, healthy product that is highly sought after by the American consumers. My beef is raised to American standards, American regulations for American consumers. American-born and -raised beef is being replaced by a commingled product from multiple countries that is marketed as an American product. I believe this is deceptive to American consumers and it is being done to bolster the profits of multinational meat companies, not for the benefit of the American consumers or American ranchers.

American consumers demand a product that is held to a different standard. As food suppliers we have a responsibility to meet these demands. As independent cattle producers we have modified our operations to meet these demands. Today the federal government allows beef, born and raised under a different standard, to be marketed in a fashion that



Scott Nielsen

makes it appear as our product.

— Scott Nielsen is a Rice, Wash., rancher, president of the Stevens County Cattlemen’s Association and treasurer of the Cattle Producers of Washington.

#### WHEAT

**F**armers make up the base of American agriculture. To help keep this base strong, we urge that any major policy decision made by your administration have grower input from across the different commodities. Additionally, agencies beyond the USDA, like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, can impact agriculture, so it is essential that policy and regulations be based on sound science, interagency coordination and are not unnecessarily burdensome.

While we understand that politics must play a role, we hope that your administration will put the grower first. To us, farming is not a job. It is our passion and livelihood. It is critical that your team recognizes this as it works to bring in new guidelines.

Every day, America’s wheat farmers work hard to feed consumers here and abroad. Wheat is a food grain and is vital to maintaining a healthy diet. As a result, we believe that wheat can play a large role in ending food insecurity. Lastly, a strong trade agenda and agriculture can create jobs as the economy rebounds from COVID-19. We look forward to working with you and your team over these next four years.

— Dave Milligan is a Cass City, Mich., wheat farmer and president of the National Association of Wheat Growers.



Dave Milligan

#### DAIRY

**T**he dairy industry thanks you for working with agriculture to understand our priorities as you shape your plans for our country. Like many in agriculture, dairy was hard-hit by the impacts of COVID when restaurants and schools closed. While some recovery has been evident and the USDA’s Food Boxes for Families program was successful and much-needed, our future focus will be on driving exports and innovation in the dairy category at large.



John Brubaker

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## Farmers pan Gov. Inslee’s unemployment fund tax plan

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

Washington agricultural employers face triple-digit tax increases to replenish the state’s unemployment fund, drained by economy-wide layoffs and raided by a Nigerian fraud ring.

Gov. Jay Inslee also proposes to increase jobless benefits by about \$200 million this year. To dull the short-term pain to employers, the governor proposes to somewhat restrain tax hikes in 2021.

In the long run, however, the rates that farms and other businesses pay for unemployment insurance would rise even higher.

Washington Farm Bureau associate director of government relations Breanne Elsey said Jan. 14 lawmakers should shore up the unemployment fund with state or federal revenues, until government lockdowns end.

“Many of us believe the fund will fix itself when the economy reopens,” she said. “The fund itself is incredibly resilient.”

The unemployment fund was a robust \$4.86 billion a year ago. It dwindled to \$1.96 billion by late last year and is projected to decline further this year as the pandemic continues.

To make matters worse, a Nigerian fraud ring scammed \$600 million from the fund as of June 30, according to the state’s auditor.

Most of the money has been recovered. The Employment Security Department says losses now stand at \$243 million.

Even employers who didn’t lay off workers will pay to rebuild the fund. Unemployment insurance rates are based partly on a “social tax” that spreads out the burden of paying jobless benefits when unemployment rates rise.

“Really, the hit to agriculture here is the social cost,” Elsey said.

Elsey said she’s talked to farmers whose next payments, due April 1, are increasing by 200% to 600%.

“We’ve had rates basically all over the map,” she said.

Kitititas County farmer Karen Poulsen told the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee on Jan. 13 that she has paid one \$400 unemployment claim in 28 years, yet faces higher taxes.

“I have not pulled money out of the unemployment system,” she said. “I think the state should tap the federal funds first and then the general fund rather than adding the cost, especially the social costs, onto the back of employers like myself.”

Based on current formulas, the average tax employers pay on wages will rise to 1.88% from 1.03%. Under the Inslee administration’s proposal, the average tax would be 1.17% this year.

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## Spotted owl’s ‘critical habitat’ cut by 3.5 million acres

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

The federal government has removed 17 times more land from the threatened spotted owl’s “critical habitat” than it had originally proposed, likely provoking a court challenge.

Environmentalists and the timber industry expect a legal battle over the Trump administration’s 3.47 million-acre reduction to the owl’s critical habitat, up from the 205,000-acre

decrease initially proposed last year.

Critical habitat for federally protected species cannot be adversely modified, even if it’s unoccupied, which is seen as a hindrance to logging on designated acres.

Instead of leaving more than 9 million acres in the owl’s critical habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decreased it to about 6 million acres by excluding federal lands that were previously allocated for logging.

“It makes sense that would be the

focus. It will make forest management a lot simpler to administer,” said Lawson Fite, attorney with the American Forest Resource Council, a timber group. “It really puts things in a more manageable and reasonable space.”

Roughly 80% of national forests are already in reserves where logging is mostly prohibited, whereas the remaining “matrix” lands are intended to be available for timber harvest, Fite said.

However, the earlier 9.5 mil-

lion-acre critical habitat designation intruded upon those “matrix” lands, impeding logging projects on that acreage, he said.

“You have these conflicting and inconsistent management directives,” Fite said.

Likewise, the federal government’s recent critical habitat designation has excluded Bureau of Land Management property that’s required by law

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