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Opinion

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Our View

County trying to railroad farmers

The Yamhill County Commission has again been sent back to the drawing board over its ill-conceived plan to convert about three miles of an abandoned rail line into a recreational trail.

The county has been a regular visitor to the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals as it tried to ignore the concerns of farmers whose property borders the old rail line. So far, the county is 0 for 3, as LUBA has sided with the farmers.

The county still has not acknowledged that having a recreational trail dividing farmland will have a profound impact on the farmers and their livelihoods.

Many a farmer knows what happens when walkers and bicyclists

begin wandering around on their property. Some uninvited visitors use the farms as outdoor toilets. Others help themselves to the land as a picnic spot, leaving garbage behind. Others are shocked to discover that farms occasionally spray pesticides to keep insects and plant diseases at bay. Still others help themselves to crops and let their kids run near dangerous farm equipment and livestock.

Another consideration: Setbacks required for pesticide applications will cost those farmers time and money.

In a sentence, a recreational trail is incompatible with working farmland.

Consider also that the county is close to the Portland Metro area. That means a sunny summer day

during the growing season could attract crowds of walkers, bicyclists and others.

The county has pursued the trail project backwards. The first thing it should have done is meet with local farmers to understand the impacts such a project would have on them.

Then the county should have addressed those impacts. If they couldn't be addressed to the satisfaction of the farmers, who live there and depend on that land to make a living, the whole trail idea should have been dropped.

That's what an editorial in this newspaper said last June.

It was correct then, and it's correct now.

Yamhill County must stop trying to railroad those farmers.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File
Opponents of Yamhill County's plan for a rail-to-trail project through farmland gather in McMinnville, Ore., in 2019. Even after being rejected three times by the state Land Use Board of Appeals, the county is still trying to push through the trail project.

Our View

\$15 minimum wage would hit rural economy hard

Fulfilling a campaign promise, Joe Biden wants to boost the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour.

Farmers, whose livelihoods and property are on the line, are right to be wary of the possibilities.

Proponents suggest that employers are able either to absorb increased labor costs, or increase prices to offset costs without negative impacts to employees.

It's political claptrap.

Advocates say boosting the minimum wage will give millions of Americans a much-needed raise — or, at least, the ones lucky enough to keep their jobs. Politicians and proponents somehow miss the fact that hard-pressed employers will scour their operations for ways to reduce their payrolls to offset the increase. In addition to layoffs, many will switch to part-time and on-call employees as ways to save money.

Mechanization and automation, which eliminate jobs, will also become more attractive.

This wage hike would hurt small businesses the most. Big chains can absorb the increase, safe in the knowledge that their

smaller competitors won't be able to keep up. Those smaller ag operations and processors in labor-intensive sectors will be forced to sell out to larger competitors.

And it's not only businesses that will feel the pinch. Local governments and school districts will also have to raise wages, or cut staff.

President Biden put his proposal to increase the minimum wage into his \$2 billion COVID relief package. He most likely believes reluctant lawmakers — even many moderate Democrats have balked at the \$15 figure — will have a tougher time saying “no” if it's wrapped in the flag of pandemic aid.

But Congress needs to be cautious. The result will be fewer jobs, fewer businesses and a weaker rural economy. Putting the thousands of businesses battered by government reaction to the virus on a better footing makes more sense than increasing their costs.

Those seeking higher minimum wages want to use other people's money to make political points with their supporters.

Proponents of higher minimum wages may be disappointed to find out that a robust economy, not governmental fiat, benefits workers most.

Keep momentum going on trade for wheat farmers

With the United States bringing in a new administration, one of a different political party, some changes in trade policy and strategy could be expected. As the Biden administration takes shape, the National Association of Wheat Growers (NAWG) encourages it to build upon the trade successes of the Trump administration.

Additionally, NAWG stresses the importance of coalition-building in pursuing solutions to trade disputes and to work towards restoring a functional appeals system at the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Further, NAWG urges the Biden administration to advocate for wheat on the world stage by continuing to support export market development programs through the annual budget process and to work collaboratively to reduce trade barriers. The U.S. exports 50% of its wheat crop, making it a priority for America's farmers, which should also mean a priority for the new administration.

The Trump administration's efforts to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), now known as the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), proved to be beneficial for wheat growers. Mexico has also consistently been a top market for U.S. wheat exports. Through NAFTA, the U.S. had tariff-free access, which was maintained in USMCA.

Additionally, USMCA made important improvements to Canada's grain grading system, which provides better treatment of U.S. wheat being sold to Canadian elevators, and it updated the sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards that were modeled from the SPS requirements in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Maintaining tariff-free access and strengthening science-based disciplines for SPS measures with Mexico is essential to the U.S. wheat industry. NAWG is counting on the Biden administration to fully honor the intent of the USMCA.

Another notable success garnered by the Trump administration is the Phase 1 trade deal with China. In exchange for the U.S. cutting some of its tariffs on Chinese goods, China pledged to purchase more American farm, energy and manufactured goods. Retaliatory tariffs from China had a significantly negative impact on farmers.

However, since the signing of the Phase 1 agreement with China, combined with the market development efforts undertaken by U.S.

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Chandler Goule



Wheat Associates (USW), U.S. wheat sales to China have totaled more than 2.8 million tons, representing a near doubling of our long-term average annual sales to China.

Separately, trade and investment discussions with Vietnam, a growing wheat import market, resulted in securing a reduced tariff rate for imported U.S. wheat.

Additionally, the bilateral agreement with Japan negotiated by the Trump administration put the U.S. back onto a level playing field with our competitors. The next administration should continue to build upon these market development actions.

Unfortunately, China continues to be a bad actor in the trade arena and some countries are following suit. In 2019, the United States won two WTO cases against China's tariff rate quota scheme and domestic support policies. However, China has yet to fully comply in either case.

Additionally, India and other developing countries have been on the same trend of providing trade-distorting subsidies that far exceed WTO commitments. The Biden administration should build on the China domestic support case's success to bring other countries into compliance through litigation.

American wheat farmers need a strong voice on the world stage. There are many opportunities for the Biden administration to be an international advocate for wheat and capitalize on new trade deals. For instance, Brexit provides an opportunity for change to wheat exports to the United Kingdom, and hopefully wheat tariffs will be fully eliminated in a final U.S.-U.K. agreement.

International trade is critical to U.S. wheat growers, and our overseas customers demand high quality wheat, which American farmers are proud to supply. NAWG urges the Biden administration to continue to work from the Trump administration's trade successes. Additionally, the new administration must hold bad actors, like China, to their commitments and make them accountable for violating any WTO rulings.

Further, NAWG asks the Biden administration to be a strong advocate for wheat on the international stage and to help find new market opportunities for wheat.

Chandler Goule is CEO of the National Association of Wheat Growers.

Activist stories do not reflect reality of mink farming

With the concerns we all have about bringing COVID-19 under control, it is not surprising that outbreaks on several U.S. mink farms have become news, a story fanned by those who already oppose any use of animals, even for food.

The more outrageous and sensational the fears, of course, the more likely that they spread quickly through the news media and social networks.

Less exciting is the insistence by animal and public health authorities that the virus in mink presents little risk to the general population.

The facts are clear: There are no documented cases of mink-to-human transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in the U.S. There were 12 suspected cases of transmission of the “Cluster 5” mutation of the virus in Denmark (not 214 “confirmed cases,” as activists are claiming). Furthermore, this Cluster 5 variant has not been detected since September and is now considered extinct.

Mutations are very common with all viruses — and some can be dangerous, like the variant that has emerged among humans in Britain — but there is little concern among health authorities that the mutation that occurred in Denmark will reduce the efficacy of vaccines for humans.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, America's leading virologist, states, “It does not appear, at this point, that that mutation that's been identified in the minks is going to have an impact on vaccines and affect a vaccine-induced response.”

Activists have also jumped on the news that two mink trapped outside infected farms (one in Utah and one in Oregon) showed low levels of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. They claim these isolated cases represent an existential threat to wildlife and may create a “viral reservoir” that will endanger public health.

They rarely mention that at least nine other species were captured at the same time, and none tested positive for the virus. Mink are solitary

animals, and experts agree that it is highly unlikely that they will spread the virus to humans or wildlife.

Another fact not often reported is that the virus on affected mink farms is rapidly clearing. The most recent round of testing on the farm in Oregon has found no trace of the virus. Mink farmers have long practiced robust biosecurity to protect their animals from diseases carried by wildlife. By implementing stepped-up precautions as recommended by the USDA and the CDC, mink farmers have been able to successfully contain the outbreaks that have occurred.

So, next time you read the end-of-the-world scenarios being used to call for an end to mink farming, spare a moment to think of the farmers who are acting responsibly to protect their animals, their livelihoods, and the health of their families and neighbors.

Michael Whelan is the executive director of Fur Commission USA, the national trade association representing U.S. mink farmers, based in Medford, Ore.

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