



Bill Breneman/EO Media Group File

Dense smoke caused by wildfires along the Santiam Canyon blocks the sunlight. Oregon lawmakers are considering a legislative package to reduce future wildfire risk with targeted forest treatments.

Oregon lawmakers consider 'all-lands' approach to wildfire risk

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Oregon would emphasize reducing fuels in high-risk forests near communities and key environmental resources as part of broader legislation aimed at mitigating wildfire hazards.

A crucial aspect of the proposal involves steering forest treatments toward where they're most needed, regardless of property ownership.

"We are taking an all-lands approach here," said Dylan Kruse, government affairs director for the Sustainable Northwest nonprofit organization. "Immediately, we're going where there's the most urgent need."

Though the Oregon Department of Forestry would take charge of the planning and implementation, the agency would rely on help from Oregon State University and other entities.

The targeted approach would likewise rely on state money while "leveraging" funds from the federal government.

At its core, the legislation is aimed at selecting where and how to conduct forest projects that would be most effective, Kruse said.

"We know we can't treat all the forest acreage we want to in this state, so we have to narrow down and prioritize where we get the best return on investment," Kruse said during a recent legislative hearing.

The U.S. Forest Service has developed a "quantitative wildfire risk assessment" that indicates about 5.6 million acres in Oregon need fuels treatments, he said.

Under the legislation, projects would begin in the four highest risk categories, with an eye toward protecting human life, property and critical infrastructure, as well as watershed health and habitat restoration.

For projects to be under-

taken on federal lands, they would have to undergo analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act and exclude roadless areas, riparian reserves and other sensitive sites.

The ODF already engages in "shared stewardship" projects with the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies, so the proposed legislation would accelerate this approach, said Jeff Burns, the department's partnership and planning director.

In February, the agency requested collaborative project proposals from across the state and received 93 applications for roughly \$20 million, he said. The ODF is funding 37 of those proposals with \$4 million from the state's emergency board — enough to treat 7,000 acres — but has another 56 "shelf-ready" projects as a result.

Under the most recent version of Senate Bill 248, one of the bills being considered, ODF would receive \$20 million to implement new projects in the 2021-2023 biennium.

The current proposal would serve as a type of "pilot project" that lays the groundwork for future treatments and partnerships, said Kruse.

Of the 5.6 million acres identified as requiring management by the Forest Service, about 65% are on federal lands, 25% are owned by small woodland owners, 6% belong to state, local and tribal governments, and only 4% are on industrial timber properties, said Kyle Williams, forest production director for the Oregon Forest & Industries Council, a timber group.

"Our federal lands are struggling. They're overstocked, overgrown and underutilized," Williams said.

To increase the resiliency of forests and prevent wildfires, the problem can't be categorized into "silos" of land ownership but must be considered in terms of the entire landscape, he said.

Company applies to plant solar, wind project on farmland

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

A state council next week will have public hearings on plans to build solar panels and erect wind turbines on thousands of acres of farmland in Benton County in south-central Washington.

Scout Clean Energy of Boulder, Colo., would lease 72,295 acres. While 6,860 acres would be "permanently impacted," the rest could remain in agricultural production, according to the company's application to the Washington Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council.

The project has encountered opposition. Two county commissioners have said they oppose it. Up to 244 wind turbines would be visible in the Tri-Cities, as well as neighboring Frank-



Capital Press File

Wind turbines line a ridge in a wheat field north of Helix, Ore. A Colorado company proposes to put up to 244 turbines on farmland to the north in Benton County, Wash.

lin and Walla Walla counties and Oregon.

Wheat farmer Chris Wiley, one of 69 landowners who have signed lease agreements, said the stable annual income will help farmers keep farming.

"This is definitely a way to keep family farms in the family for generations," he said.

"As far as taking farm-

land out of production, it's pretty negligible," Wiley said. "We've weighed the pros and cons, and we've decided we're in favor of it."

Scout Energy, owned by private investment firm Quinbrook Infrastructure Partners, has been putting together the parcels for several years.

Rather than seek approval from a county hearings

examiner, the company last month opted to apply to the state council, an unelected board of public employees that makes recommendations to Gov. Jay Inslee.

In its application, Scout Energy said the wind and solar project will help the state have carbon-neutral electricity by 2030, a signature goal of Inslee's climate-change agenda.

Rep. Brad Klippert, R-Kennewick, said Monday he opposes the project, saying wind turbines have marred Central Washington's landscape. He called handing over the decision to Inslee "tragic."

"When so many of my constituents say they oppose something, I listen," he said. "Now it's a decision that will be shoved down the local area's throat."

Regulatory changes in store for meat industry under new administration

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

New rules and regulations are headed for the meat industry under the Biden administration.

"We're gonna see a lot of new rules," Andrew Harig, a policy expert at FMI, the Food Industry Association, told attendees at the virtual 2021 Annual Meat Conference Tuesday.

The meat industry, experts say, should be prepared for changes surrounding supply chains, traceability, salmonella tracking, labeling and antitrust issues.

Supply chains

On Feb. 24, Biden issued an executive order on America's supply chains requiring the secretary of agriculture and other officials to investigate supply chains for "agricultural commodities and food products." By next February, officials must submit findings and recommendations to the president.

Later this year, farmers will have an opportunity to comment on what's good and bad about their supply chains.

Traceability

On Sept. 23, prompted by section 204 of the Food Safety Modernization Act, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued a proposed rule on traceability.

If adopted, the rule, called "Requirements for Additional Traceability Records for Certain Foods," will require everyone along the meat supply chain to keep more detailed records. Farmers would have eight more data factors to track.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press File

A plant manager walks through rows of carcasses at a meat processing facility. Experts say the meat industry should be prepared for a slew of regulatory changes under the new administration.

"As drafted, it's a big, broad rule," said Harig of FMI.

He said the rule could lead to cross-regulation between FDA and USDA.

"Once the genie's out of the bottle, it's hard to stuff it back in," he said.

Casey Gallimore, director of regulatory and scientific affairs at the North Ameri-

can Meat Institute, called the proposal "unworkable."

The rulemaking is not finalized, and Gallimore encouraged producers to contact FDA.

Salmonella

Producers can also expect the administration to crack down on salmonella.

"I'd argue salmonel-

la's the biggest issue facing the industry today," said Gallimore.

Salmonella prevalence in beef is low, so upcoming standards likely won't be too stringent on beef. Under the Food Safety and Inspection Service's proposal, within a 52-week window, FSIS will review the most recent 48 samples. Two or fewer positive salmonella samples would meet performance standards; three or more would fail.

A similar proposal is underway for pork, but the final version won't be released until 2022. It's expected to have three categories: pass, fail and warning.

When a company fails a salmonella test, it will be published in a public disclosure database — Gallimore calls it a "naughty list." This already happens in the poultry industry.

Washington overtime bill gets House hearing

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Farmworkers said Tuesday they are worried about losing money, joining employers in asking lawmakers to add a limited harvest-season exemption to Washington's coming agricultural overtime law.

Uriel Vargas, a farmworker, said that if farms can't afford paying time-and-a-half after 40 hours, workers will have to move around to maintain their incomes.

"Please change this bill and keep us at one place and not have to get a second job somewhere else," Vargas asked the House Labor and Workplace Standards Committee.

The committee took testimony on Senate Bill 5172, which phases in overtime pay for all farmworkers. The bill passed the Senate and got its first hearing in the House on Tuesday.

The bill responds to the state Supreme Court's ruling in November that declared denying dairy workers overtime wages after 40 hours

was unconstitutional. The decision opened the floodgate for lawsuits seeking back pay and to expand the ruling to other farm sectors.

The 5-4 ruling commits dairies to immediately pay overtime. The Senate bill, however, gives dairies protection against the back-pay lawsuits.

For other farms, the overtime threshold will be 55 hours beginning Jan. 1, 2022. The threshold drops to 48 hours on Jan. 1, 2023, and finally to 40 hours on Jan. 1, 2024.

The bill has the support of labor groups such as the United Farm Workers and Familias Unidas por la Justicia, an independent farmworker union.

Farm lobbyists are not opposing the bill, but they are focused on adding a provision to permanently lift the overtime threshold to 50 hours for 12 weeks chosen by the farm.

Washington State Labor Council government affairs director Joe Kendo said the seasonal exemption would undermine the protective nature of the court's ruling

and the overtime law.

"The purpose of overtime is to limit the exposure of workers to the physical demands of work," Kendo said.

Other farmworkers besides Vargas said that they're more worried about their pay checks than overtime hours.

The weather and crops dictate the hours — sometimes 20 and sometimes 60 in a week, said Ignacio Diaz, a Quincy farm owner and farm employee.

"We cannot control that," he said. "As a small business owner I know I can't afford overtime for my employees."

Farmworkers are paid overtime in a handful of states. No state has handled the issue like Washington, where a one-judge majority discarded a 61-year-old law, leaving lawyers, lobbyists and legislators to clean up.

By a legislative act, California has been phasing in overtime for several years. Beginning next year, farms with more than 25 workers must pay time-and-a-half after 40 hours. Smaller farms will get there in 2025.





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