

Inslee denies plea to end farmworker housing rules

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Gov. Jay Inslee declined Monday to repeal COVID-related rules for housing farmworkers, requiring fully vaccinated farmworkers to wear masks in off hours even as he relaxes rules for other industries.



Gov. Jay Inslee

The governor formally rejected a petition from the Washington Farm Bureau and Wafla, a supplier of foreign farmworkers. The groups appealed to Inslee to drop the year-old emergency rules.

The health emergency continues and repealing the rules would be premature, according to the governor's office. Inslee and his cabinet will update COVID requirements as the threat of the virus wanes, according to his office.

The Farm Bureau and Wafla contend the rules are unreasonable, especially since nearly all workers are vaccinated. The groups submitted the petition May 14, one day after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that fully vaccinated people could safely resume their pre-pandemic activities.

The farm groups said Tuesday that Inslee is holding agriculture to a different standard than other businesses.

"We were greatly disappointed in just a flat-out dismissal of our concerns," Farm Bureau CEO John Stuhlmeier said Tuesday.

The emergency rules limit the use of bunk beds to shelters housing no more than 15 isolated workers. The restriction reduces capacity in company housing.

Isolated 15-worker groups can share restrooms, kitchens and buses with other isolated 15-worker groups if all workers are fully vaccinated, but the fully vaccinated workers must wear masks and be socially distanced.

Farmers, who are responsible for seeing that workers obey the rules, are being forced to spend time enforc-

ing absurd regulations or risk being fined, Wafla CEO Dan Fazio said.

The mask requirement contradicts the governor's announcement May 21 that vaccinated employees can work without masks, Fazio said.

"There is growing anger in the farm community," he said. "We can't go through the harvest with these rules. ... It's beyond crazy."

The emergency rules have been extended until at least Sept. 6. Even with the CDC's new guidance, the threat of infection remains, Inslee wrote, responding to the petition.

The Health Department and Labor and Industries have taken a "measured approach" to relaxing the housing rules, according to Inslee.

"I have not wavered in my view that agricultural workers living in worker housing facilities are particularly vulnerable to the disease, although I am optimistic that vaccination rates will continue to improve in the coming months," Inslee said.

The farm groups contend the restrictions are counterproductive. With housing capacity reduced, more employees must live in the community, where workers are more likely to get COVID, they argue.

Testing last year by the Health Department supports the farm groups' position. Employees at Gebbers Farms in Central Washington were three times more likely to contract the virus if they lived in the community, rather than company housing.

Gebbers has appealed a \$2 million fine for not housing or transporting workers in numbers prescribed by the state.

Although the state has issued new mask guidelines for vaccinated workers, it has not repealed COVID-related workplace rules for agriculture.

Farms are struggling to keep up with the rules, Stuhlmeier said. "It is so confusing. Nobody knows what the law is, frankly," he said.

Idaho board ponders an increase in wolf harvest

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

BOISE — Contracting regulations are among the challenges the Idaho Wolf Depredation Control Board will face in carrying out a new state law aimed at expanding harvest of the predators.

The new law allows the board to hire private contractors to kill wolves. It also increases funding to the board.

Comments at the board's May 19 meeting included that the law could result in the over-harvest of wolves and have impacts on ecosystems. The cost per wolf was also mentioned, as well as using non-lethal deterrence for reducing wolf-livestock conflicts.

Ranchers strongly supported the law, largely because the wolf population has surged well above federal targets despite larger harvests in recent years. The summer population is about 1,500.

"There is a common misconception that life is going to be easier with contracting," said board co-chair Celia Gould, director of the state Department of Agriculture. The board must comply with contracting rules and accepted procedures, like any state agency.

The board would be dealing with more unknowns, at least initially, in dealing with private contractors, said Fish and Game Director Ed Schriever,

board co-chair.

The wolf board now contracts exclusively with USDA Wildlife Services, and "they have been responsive to the livestock industry," he said. Though Wildlife Services may not be as cost-effective as a private contractor, "they are responsive, a known entity and available."

Schriever said the new law doesn't mandate that the board use private contractors and "we want to go into that with our eyes wide open."

Talasi Brooks, staff attorney with the Western Watersheds Project, told Capital Press the law amounts to the Legislature wresting authority from the state Fish and Game Commission, a part of the executive branch created by 1933 voter initiative to be nonpartisan.

"Not only will this legislative interference spell a death sentence for wolves in Idaho, but it also sets a dangerous precedent for the Legislature interfering in fish and game management to achieve its own political ends," she said.

Wildlife Services in Idaho from January through March conducted 12 depredation investigations related to wolf complaints from livestock producers, State Director Jared Hedelius said. Eight were confirmed wolf depredations, two were potential wolf depredations, and two were determined to be non-wolf.

Strong cherry demand forecasted; Western crop size is 'good'

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

Experts forecast a large California cherry crop and an about-average Pacific Northwest crop, according to the second round of industry estimates released this month. Demand looks strong.

California is expected to produce 9 million to 10 million 18-pound boxes, near the record volume produced in 2017, according to the California Cherry Advisory Board.

Growers across the Pacific Northwest — Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Utah and Montana — forecast 22 million to 22.8 million 20-pound boxes, in line with the 10-year average. This is about 1 million fewer boxes than industry leaders originally estimated the first week of May.

"It's a nice crop — not huge, but good," said B.J. Thurlby, president of the Washington State Fruit Tree Commission and Northwest Cherry Growers.

This year's losses can be attributed to frost, wind damage and pollination challenges across pockets of Oregon and Washington.

Growers say Oregon, which produced about 40,000 tons last year, will only yield 30,000 to 33,000 tons in



Washington State Fruit Commission

Despite industry challenges, cherry growers across the West say they're generally optimistic about a good crop and strong demand.

2021.

"Our crop is definitely not as big as last year," said Brenda Thomas, grower and president of Orchard View Cherries in the Dalles.

Compared to last year, California is picking more fruit, and later. In 2020, California finished shipping around June 9. This year, shipping is expected to last through June 20.

In contrast, Washington may start picking sooner than expected. Growers earlier in May forecasted picking would start June 1, but

Thurlby said because of recent warm weather, picking may start at the end of May — again in line with 2020.

A slight overlap in California and Pacific Northwest crops is expected. Too much overlap could result in an oversupply that drives down prices, but Tate Mathison, director of sales and a fifth-generation farmer at Stemilt, said he thinks the overlap will probably be a good thing and will help "fill the supply gap" that sometimes occurs in June.

Industry leaders across the region say they expect strong

demand this year.

E-commerce in cherries last year "exploded," experts say, with 42% of cherry buyers purchasing at least some cherries online during 2020. The industry will continue to push online sales alongside brick-and-mortar avenues.

Fruit sales in general have been strong this spring, a good market predictor for cherries.

James Michael, vice president of marketing at Northwest Cherry Growers, said the industry this year will focus on promoting cherries' health benefits. Michael said the industry will tout cherries as anti-inflammatory, anti-cancer, low-glycemic and good for blood pressure.

But the cherry industry also faces some challenges.

China still imposes a 25% tariff plus a 9% value-added tax on U.S. cherries. They are expected to continue.

Domestically, retailers and shippers are struggling with a shortage of trucks and drivers.

High lumber prices have led to a palette shortage, which could also present logistical difficulties.

India is facing another wave of COVID-19 cases, forcing the cherry industry to scale back its India marketing campaigns.

Dairy farmer, seed producer appointed to Oregon Board of Ag

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A dairy farmer and a seed producer are the newest members of the Oregon Board of Agriculture, which advises regulators at the state's Department of Agriculture.

Chad Allen of Victor Dairy has worked in the Tillamook dairy industry his entire life and was appointed by Gov. Kate Brown to replace Marty Myers, manager of Threemile Canyon Farms, who died last year.

Randi Svaty of Ontario Seed Farms in Ontario operates the farm with her husband, Ryan, and serves as the local branch manager for Northwest Farm Credit Services. She was appointed to replace Grant Kitamura, an onion producer who moved out-of-state earlier this year.



Chad Allen



Randi Svaty

Allen said.

As far as specific policy advice for ODA, Allen said it's not possible to "know what's around the next bend" but he expects water and land use to remain perennially important topics for the agency.

Allen said he has a "personal passion" for protecting exclusive farm use zones and the "right to farm" in Oregon, and hopes to "bring common sense to the table" regarding controversies over the dairy industry.

Conservation projects are often adjacent to dairy farms in the Tillamook area and the region has shown that agriculture doesn't need to be eliminated to improve water quality and environmental conditions, he said.

"I believe we can accomplish a lot of things if we work together on it," Allen

said.

Svaty said that between growing up on a ranch, marrying a farmer and working at an agricultural bank, "ag is just who I am, it's all I know."

By serving on the Board of Agriculture, Svaty hopes to inform the state's farm regulators about how regulatory policies will affect growers on the ground.

"The ODA has a lot to do with how we farm and raise our animals," she said.

Irrigation availability and other water issues are likely to remain a key issue for the agency, she said. "It's a topic that's always been there but it needs to be on our radar all the time."

In light of Oregon's higher tax and regulatory burden, the state's farmers must also seek ways to add value to their crops and livestock to remain competitive, Svaty said.

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