

## What's in the \$1.5 trillion omnibus spending package for agriculture?

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN  
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — President Biden has signed into law a massive spending package, the \$1.5 trillion fiscal year 2022 Omnibus Appropriations Bill.

The package makes significant investments in agriculture, food systems and rural communities.

Here's what's included:

- Winegrape smoke exposure research: The bill includes \$3 million for Oregon State University and other West Coast universities to research smoke-impacted grapes.

- Water conservation and habitat restoration: \$100 million is appropriated for the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations. This money will be used to replace open irrigation ditches with pipes. Some dollars will go toward construction projects in Central Oregon, including in Tualo Irrigation District and Central Oregon Irrigation District.

- Western livestock studies: The bill includes \$3 million to establish a Western Rangeland Precision Livestock Center intended to develop strategies to boost the health and productivity of rangeland livestock and ecosystems. The money will be split among land-grant universities in Oregon, Montana and Wisconsin.

- Sudden oak death and other agricultural research: The Agricultural Research Service received an increase of \$180 million in funding. Dollars will also go toward studying sudden oak death and other pathogens.

- Hemp: \$4 million will go to the Agricultural Research Services for hemp genetic research and breeding.

- Rural housing: The bill includes \$1.45 billion for rental assistance and \$45 million for Rural Housing

Service vouchers to help rural communities facing housing crises.

- Rural energy-saving program: The bill includes \$208 million for energy efficiency upgrades to rural utilities and similar companies.

- Pacific shellfish: \$2.5 million will fund research to improve the "productivity, sustainability and resiliency of the Pacific shellfish agricultural system."

- Summer nutrition: The bill funds the summer nutrition program at \$45 million.

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): SNAP is funded at \$140.4 billion, a 23% increase over fiscal year 2021.

- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP): The bill appropriates \$581 million to this program that serves meals and snacks to children and teens in low-income areas.

- Food Corps: The bill adds \$500,000 for Food and Agriculture Service Learning, which teaches kids to "eat healthy."

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley also secured federal funding in the bill for nine projects specific to Oregon. These include:

- \$4.8 million to modernize the Ochoco Irrigation District.

- \$2.5 million to pipe the Eastside Lateral Canal for the East Fork Irrigation District of Hood River County.

- \$2 million for the Wal-lowa Lake Dam Rehabilitation project.

- \$750,000 for the McKay Creek Irrigation Efficiency Project organized by the Deschutes River Conservancy.

- \$500,000 to construct a new Community Center in Detroit. The previous one was destroyed in the 2020 Labor Day fires.

- \$450,000 to restore the commissary building on the Warm Springs Reservation.

## West Coast winegrowers move toward 'no-touch' mechanized vineyards

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN  
Capital Press

CENTRAL POINT, Ore. — Last week, Alexander "Alec" Levin, Oregon State University viticulturist and assistant professor, planted a "no-touch" vineyard at a Southern Oregon research center. The experimental 1.25-acre plot of Pinot noir winegrapes will be pruned, tended and harvested almost entirely by machines.

Levin said what's driving him to experiment is Oregon's agricultural labor crisis: a short supply of laborers combined with rising wages and a pending overtime pay requirement. Levin said he expects many growers who want to stay economically sustainable will invest in automation in the future.

"The writing's kind of on the wall here," said Levin. "As far as I see it, labor is as much of an existential issue as something like, say, lack of water."

Oregon has a long way to go in vineyard automation compared to California.

Levin estimated that half or less of Oregon's vineyard acreage is mechanically harvested and even fewer acres are mechanically pruned. In contrast, 90% of winegrapes crushed in the U.S. — the vast majority from California — are machine-harvested, and mechanical pruning is gaining momentum.

Kaan Kurtural, associate cooperative extension viticulture specialist at the Uni-



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**A V-mech pruner in a vineyard. Managers are looking ways to mechanize their operations, including developing "no-touch" vineyards.**



**Sahap Kaan Kurtural** **Alexander Levin**

versity of California-Davis, said harvest has long been mechanized in California, but the "final hurdle" was automated pruning.

In recent years, Kurtural ran experiments in a 40-acre "touchless vineyard" in the Napa Valley, producing fine Cabernet Sauvignon with machines. His experiments involved a mechanical pruner manufactured by Fresno-based V-mech LLC. Trials are complete and, he said, "It's now the commercial go-to system."

Based on cost studies Kurtural has conducted with other researchers, approximately 80% of all vineyard labor costs can be attributed to pruning and harvesting. Mechanizing those activities can save 60% to 80% of labor costs per acre.

Automating also saves time. Kurtural estimated it takes, on average, 40 man-hours to prune 1 acre by hand. A machine can prune the same acre in 45 minutes.

California's overtime wage rules, he said, have accelerated adoption of mechanical pickers and pruners, making vineyard automation "an economic necessity."

With Oregon also moving toward overtime pay for farmworkers, Kurtural said his office has recently received a higher volume of

inquiries about automation from Oregon vineyardists.

"Growers in Oregon are asking us our opinions," he said. "They're asking us how they should plan for this."

Levin, of OSU, has similarly encountered grower interest in automation.

The purpose of his experimental vineyard is to explore how mechanization can be most effective in Oregon.

Levin said growers sometimes attempt to mechanize pruning in older vineyards that weren't set up to handle the equipment. For the highest chance of success, Levin said, young vines should be planted to accommodate machinery.

For example, Levin's plot has fewer wires, different trellising and a higher fruiting wire than what would be found in a hand-pruned vineyard.

Inevitably, he said, new vineyard configurations will also change inputs and management. For example, a sprayer might need to be oriented differently, and vines might require more fertilizer.

"Any increased input costs will likely be absorbed by the huge savings you'll realize by mechanizing because the hand labor is so overwhelmingly the highest proportion of the per-acre management cost," Levin said.

Levin and Kurtural predict that large Oregon vineyards will invest in machines and smaller vineyards will hire contractors for mechanical pruning and harvest.

## Water storage project will benefit Columbia Basin farms and fish

By GEORGE PLAVERN  
Capital Press

DUFUR, Ore. — Underground water storage along Fifteenmile Creek in Oregon's Dufur Valley could provide some much-needed

relief for farms and imperiled fish, replenishing dangerously low streamflows during the region's hot and dry summer months.

The Wasco County Soil and Water Conservation District is evaluating a pro-

posal that would divert surface water from the creek when flows are naturally higher in winter and spring. Water would be injected into a deep basalt well and later returned in-stream when needed.

Tech giant Google, which operates a massive data center in nearby The Dalles, recently donated \$100,000 to help build a small pilot project 6 miles upstream from Dufur.

Fifteenmile Creek is a 54-mile-long tributary of the Columbia River, flowing from the Cascade Range near Mount Hood to just below The Dalles Dam. It includes habitat for several fish species, including Mid-Columbia steelhead, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Nearly three-quarters of the 373-square-mile watershed is also used for agriculture, primarily dryland wheat, irrigated hay fields and tree fruit orchards.

Shilah Olson, Wasco SWCD manager, said that despite irrigators being within their water rights, surface flows in Fifteenmile Creek are over-allocated during the summer, limiting allocations while also posing a threat to steelhead.

"The main thing is limiting their liability under the ESA," Olson said, adding that violations of the law can quickly add up to hefty fines.

Since 2013, some irrigators have voluntarily agreed to reduce their surface water pumping from Fifteenmile Creek when streamflows drop critically low for fish. Salmonids, in particular, are vulnerable when the water temperature rises above 68 degrees.

One significant example saw thousands of juvenile

steelhead perish in warm, shallow water in 2009.

That led to the creation of the Fifteenmile Action Plan to Stabilize Temperature, or FAST. Last year, 16 participants with senior water rights spanning 770 acres turned off their water pumps on 21 "alert days," saving roughly 6.6 million gallons of water for fish per day.

In exchange, the irrigators receive direct payments through the program from a variety of sources, including the Freshwater Trust and Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

By 2015, stakeholders began looking at other options to bolster summer flows in Fifteenmile Creek. First, Olson said they hired an engineering firm to study building an off-channel reservoir, though it proved too problematic and expensive.

Irrigators instead shifted their focus to underground storage, which appeared to be a viable alternative given the basin's hydrology and aquifers.

To prove whether the theory is correct, Olson said they will develop a small-scale pilot project on a quarter-acre of private land. The Wasco SWCD has applied to divert 1 cubic feet per second of water from Fifteenmile Creek between December and March, totaling 110 acre-feet of storage.

The water would be placed in an infiltration basin, allowing it to filter down through the soil until it reaches a series of gravity-fed pipes. The pipes would send the water to a sump, which would then pump it into the basalt well.

Olson said it remains unclear who will own and operate the facility. "At the end of the day, that's still the million-dollar question," she said.

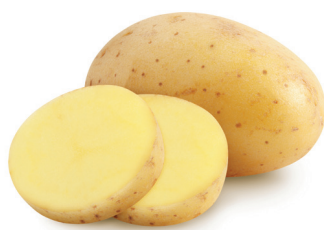
Once the water is returned in-stream, it would not be available for irrigation withdrawals.

"However, it will still provide a benefit as we hope to strike an ecological balance to support aquatic species and help irrigators to continue using their full water right as long into the summer as possible," Olson said.

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