

State lawmakers scrap proposal allowing local biotech restrictions

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A proposal to give local governments in Oregon the power to regulate biotech crops has been scrapped in favor of a labeling requirement for genetically engineered fish.

Lawmakers recently considered overturning the state's prohibition against local restrictions on genetically modified crops, which was passed in 2013.

Biotech critics claim that local ordinances are necessary to prevent cross-pollination between transgenic, conventional and organic crops because the state and federal governments have failed to act on the issue.

Opponents of the proposal, House Bill 4122, argued that it would complicate farming across county lines, reduce crop options and put a strain on local governments that would have to enforce such ordinances.

The House Committee on Consumer Protection and Government Effectiveness heard extensive testimony from both sides during a Tuesday hearing but ultimately decided to "gut and stuff" the bill with language that requires labeling for genetically engineered fish sold at retail.

On Thursday, the amended bill was approved 5-3 and is headed to the House floor with a "do pass" recommendation.

Prior to the amendment's approval, state Rep. Mike Nearman, R-Dallas, said it would be unfortunate if the current system of voluntary cooperation among farmers were replaced with a "bureaucratic solution" for cross-pollination concerns.

"They try to solve their problems by talking with each other and working with each other," Nearman said.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, said he also wishes such problems could be worked out amicably, but farmers who fear cross-pol-

ination from biotech crops don't currently have a system to prevent economic losses.

After the Legislature preempted local regulation of seeds — including biotech crops — in 2013, their concern hasn't been addressed, he said.

"I think they have a legitimate issue that needs to be solved," Holvey said. "I hope the Department of Agriculture solves it or the Legislature does in the future."

'There is some urgency to this issue.'

Rep. Shemia Fagan
D-Clackamas

Committee Chairwoman Shemia Fagan, D-Clackamas, said she hopes the recent discussions in the Legislature will pressure the state Department of Agriculture to come up with a solution.

Fagan noted that heirloom crop varieties cannot be replaced once they're lost, so she hopes to give farmers some method to protect such cultivars.

"There is some urgency to this issue," she said.

A similar bill that would have more broadly reversed Oregon's seed pre-emption law, House Bill 4041, recently failed to clear the committee.

As for labeling of genetically engineered fish, Holvey said the proposal will likely be subject to further revisions in the Senate if it's approved in the House.

Transgenic salmon received regulatory approval from the Food and Drug Administration last year but its sale is on hold until the agency devises possible labeling rules.

The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.

Bill doubling renewable mandate, eliminating coal reaches House

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A bill that would double Oregon's renewable energy mandate and eliminate coal from the state's power mix is headed to the state House for a floor vote.

"We are going in a really good direction with this," state Rep. Jessica Vega Pederson, D-Portland, said of the bill. Vega Pederson is chairwoman of the House Committee on Energy and Environment, which voted 6-3 Thursday to pass the bill out of committee.

Nonetheless, several lawmakers on the committee said they had concerns about it and two Democrats who voted for the bill — Rep. Deborah Boone, D-Cannon Beach, and Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene — said they voted "yes" as a courtesy to move the bill out of committee. Those lawmakers might vote against the bill when it comes up for a full vote in the House.

"I was always worried about not hearing enough from the Public Utility Commission on this process," said Holvey, who added he hopes a Senate committee will thoroughly scrutinize the bill and perhaps make changes.

Boone also said she hoped more of the parties impacted by the bill would have a chance to shape it, as the legislation moves through the Legislature.

Double existing mandate

House Bill 4036, which was written by the state's two largest utilities and environmental groups along with the Citizens' Utility Board of Oregon, would double Oregon's existing mandate to increase renewable energy. It would require Portland General Electric and PacifiCorp to use renewable power sources such as wind and solar to serve at least 50 percent of their customers' energy demand in Oregon by

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Rep. Mark Johnson
R-Hood River

2040, up from the current state mandate of 25 percent renewable energy by 2025.

The bill would also require the investor-owned utilities to stop using coal to serve Oregon customers, but there are questions about whether the bill would actually do much to impact the phase-out of coal power in Oregon. Portland General Electric has already committed to close Oregon's only coal plant, in Boardman, by 2020, and earlier this month the utility and an environmental group said the bill would have a greater impact on the types of power utilities use to replace coal.

Avoid ballot measures

The utilities negotiated the legislation in an effort to avoid ballot measures planned by the politically active non-profit Renew Oregon, which represents a coalition of environmental groups, renewable energy companies and other businesses. The environmental groups agreed to drop their efforts to get voters to pass several new renewable energy mandates in November, including an initiative that would eliminate coal power, if lawmakers and the governor approve House Bill 4036.

The "no" votes on Thursday were all cast by Republicans, although Rep. Mark Johnson, R-Hood River, voted to move the bill out of committee.

"This is as far as we can go, putting requirements on

our electric grid," Johnson said. "It will be as green as we can be at the end of the day. We simply can't impose further cost drivers, be it cap and trade or a carbon tax."

Competing climate bill

Earlier this week, a competing climate bill passed out of the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee and advanced to the budget writing Joint Committee on Ways and Means. Senate Bill 1574, drafted by state Sen. Chris Edwards, D-Eugene, and Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield, would replace the existing renewable energy goals with a new cap on carbon emissions and a system to buy and sell carbon pollution credits.

The most forceful opponent of House Bill 4036 on Thursday was Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, who said the legislation would fundamentally undercut the ability of the Public Utility Commission to thoroughly vet rate increase requests from PacifiCorp and Portland General Electric, which are state-regulated monopolies.

Bentz often speaks about the need to combat climate change and voted last week for a bill to subsidize solar projects. However, he said a major problem with the coal and renewables bill was that it would allow utilities to seek rate increases based solely on the cost of new renewable energy projects. Bentz's con-

cerns echoed those raised by the Public Utility Commission in a public meeting last month.

When investor owned utilities make the case for the Public Utility Commission to approve a rate increase, Bentz said "they are generally required to bring in a complete picture of their business, not just a single issue."

"The only way the PUC can make heads or tails of what's told to them is to see the complete picture," Bentz said.

Bentz, who works for a law firm that has represented Idaho Power, said when he asked "utility specialists" for their opinion of the bill, the "single issue ratemaking element" was the biggest red flag.

"This is a commitment by our ratepayers to a lot of money over a lot of years," Bentz said.

Allows for rate increases

Bob Jenks, executive director of the residential ratepayer advocacy group Citizens Utility Board, said the bill does allow utilities to ask the Public Utility Commission for rate increases to cover the cost of new facilities to meet the higher renewable energy mandate. However, Jenks said the utilities already have the ability to make these requests under the state's existing, lower renewable energy requirements.

Jenks, whose group is tasked with representing ratepayers under state law, said the Public Utility Commission can still revisit the rate increases for renewables as part of the bigger picture when utilities return with requests for broader rate increases.

"It's a bridge to get them to the next general rate case and that scrutiny," Jenks said. "It's not a substitute for that."

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Grant will fund career-technical training equipment

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

Local educators and businesses are preparing to put more than \$200,000 worth of career-technical training equipment to work in schools next fall.

The consortium, which includes all five school districts in Clatsop County, Clatsop Community College and numerous local businesses, recently secured a \$305,469 grant funded by the state Legislature last session.

Melissa Linder, curriculum director for the Astoria School District, is overseeing the grant. She said the equipment will likely take the form of several work stations inside a mobile lab moving in between the county's five school districts. The lab would include stations for students to learn about pneumatics, circuit boards, saws, drill presses and other equipment used by local companies.

Money for equipment

Of the \$305,000, \$224,000 will be used to buy equipment in the spring, \$22,000 to hire a

coordinator, \$15,000 to upgrade schools' infrastructure when needed and \$32,000 in training for school staff over the summer.

After the initial expense, Linder said, the program should become relatively self-sustaining, besides repairs to the equipment.

Adding more hands-on, career-technical opportunities has been a hot topic at many a local school board meeting.

According to the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium, a career-technical support group, 90 percent of students in a career-technical program graduate high school.

"We will coordinate between superintendents where the equipment will go," Astoria Superintendent Craig Hoppes said, adding the placement will depend on schools' schedules. "It becomes the county's equipment, not just our equipment."

The consortium behind the grant has 18 partners, including letters of support from major county manufacturers, tradespeople and business groups. Hoppes said many employers have told him how kids often

lack the technical skills for available positions. Many of the local employers who supported the grant will come in and talk to students about how the skills they learn on the equipment can be utilized on the job.

Borrowed from Tillamook

Many of the county consortium's ideas are borrowed from Tillamook School District, which already received a grant to create a career-technical center.

Hoppes met last spring with state Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, and representatives from the governor's office, college and Hampton Affiliates. They told him about the program in Tillamook, where a grant-funded career-technical center trains students in robotics, electrical and other trades.

Bruce Rhodes, a grant writer in Tillamook, said the district set up electives using the technology from the grant. This year, all sophomores at Tillamook High School take at least one technology course at the center, and the district is developing more advanced



Submitted Photo

A state grant received by a Clatsop County consortium will pay for training equipment for students to learn job skills.

courses for students in the second year.

"We're trying to figure out a model that would allow as many students as possible to be exposed to as many skills as

possible," Linder said, noting the challenge of trying to share a mobile lab between five school districts across the county.

Coast Guard crews rescue six along Oregon, Washington coast

Associated Press

SEATTLE — The U.S. Coast Guard says crews rescued six people in three different search-and-rescue calls Saturday along the Washington and Oregon Coast.

The Coast Guard reported rescuing three people on Saturday morning near Coos Bay, Oregon, after their boat overturned.

On Saturday evening, two kayakers, a male and female, capsized on the northeast side

of Whidbey Island. The two swam to uninhabited Hope Island where a helicopter crew retrieved them.

Also Saturday evening, the Coast Guard says a 58-year-old man fell from a dock at the Port of Ilwaco, Washington.

A crew in a boat located the unconscious man wedged between a dock and a life raft. The crew pulled him from the water and successfully revived him within a few minutes. He was taken to a hospital.



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