

Cost of renewable mandate to ratepayers still unvetted

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers are on track to pass a bill that would double the state's renewable energy mandate before state utility regulators finish vetting the potential cost to consumers.

Lawmakers and Gov. Kate Brown instead relied so far on cost estimates by the utilities that helped to write the bill, which projected the legislation would increase ratepayers' bills by an average of roughly 1 percent annually.

The situation adds to questions about who is looking out for electricity consumers as the Legislature moves to pass the bill quickly during the short 35-day session.

The governor did not respond on Wednesday morning to questions about whether the cost of the bill mattered, and if she would sign the bill without cost vetting by state regulators.

"The Governor's Office has encouraged the (Public Utility Commission) to evaluate the bill and actively engage in the public process, which the (Public Utility Commission) pursued by providing testimony, crafting amendments, and holding its own public hearing," Brown's press secretary Chris Pair wrote in an email Wednesday morning. "We generally do not comment publicly on the governor's position on a bill in advance of its passing both houses or her legal counsel's review for legal sufficiency and constitutionality that every bill receives. That said, the governor is committed to policies that increase the availability of renewable energy and address issues around Oregonians' investment in electricity produced by coal and believes HB 4036 may be one way to make a meaningful impact."

Utilities helped craft bill

Michael Dougherty, chief operating officer of the Public Utility Commission of Oregon, said earlier this week the Public Utility Commission had not received enough information from PacifiCorp and Portland General Electric, the two investor-owned utilities that helped craft the bill, to vet the utilities' cost projections. Dougherty wrote in an email that Portland General Electric had provided only "piecemeal" information and PacifiCorp had not provided any of the information the Public Utility Commission requested.

"Unfortunately, we have not received (what we consider) adequate data from the utilities to substantiate or refute the projections (annual 1 percent to 1.5 percent increase in rates) provided to the committee by the utilities," Dougherty wrote in an email Tuesday morning. By Wednesday morning, Dougherty said the commission had received more information from Portland General Electric but he had not yet ascertained what it was or how useful it might be.

Ry Schwark, a spokesman for PacifiCorp, disagreed and said much of the information the Public Utility Commission requested was available in public reports. "My understanding is we've given them everything they've asked for," Schwark said.

Steve Corson, a spokesman for Portland General Electric, said the utility's first priority was to prepare for a presentation to the Public Utility Commission on the bill in late January. "And then turned to the data request," Corson said. "The other thing I would observe just in general is data requests are not simple things."

Concerns about cost to consumers

Public utility commissioners raised concerns privately

and at the meeting in late January, in particular that the bill would be expensive for consumers but do little to reduce carbon emissions.

The state House already voted 39-20 on Monday to pass House Bill 4036.

Brown has said publicly that she is still considering whether to support the bill, but emails released by the state showed her administration worked behind the scenes to help the bill pass in the Legislature, The Oregonian reported on Wednesday.

House Bill 4036 would require PacifiCorp and Portland General Electric to use renewable power sources such as wind and solar to serve at least 50 percent of their customers' energy demand in Oregon by 2040. The current state mandate is for 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 how much the bill would actually do to impact the phase-out of coal power in Oregon.

State Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield, originally requested the Public Utility Commission review House Bill 4036. Beyer did not respond to a question this week about whether he expects the commission to finish vetting the legislation before it receives a vote in the Senate. It also remains to be seen whether the Senate will ask the Public Utility Commission to provide its perspective on the bill, something lawmakers in the House did not do.

"At the House Energy and Environment Committee, we were not requested to provide testimony," Dougherty wrote in an email. A representative was on hand, however, to answer questions.

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

Genetically engineered fish labeling clears state House

Bill originally allowed local control over GMO crops

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Bureau

SALEM — The state House Wednesday passed a measure requiring the labeling of genetically engineered fish.

Supporters of the labeling requirement said it would allow consumers to choose conventional fish if they had doubts about the health or environmental safety of biotech salmon, which the federal government approved last year.

The bill passed with a narrow 32-27 vote.

"We deserve as consumers to have the choice where we put our money," said state Rep. Ken Helm, D-Beaverton.

Genetically engineered salmon will likely be cheaper than wild-caught fish from Oregon, so labeling will allow consumers to support their local industry, said Rep. Val Hoyle, D-Eugene.

"If they don't understand the difference, they will just buy the fish that is less expensive," she said.

Rep. John Davis, R-Wilsonville, said the bill was premature because the United States isn't importing biotech salmon from Canada until the Food and Drug Administration decides whether to require labeling.

The Oregon fishing industry is also free to label its fish as being wild-caught or non-genetically engineered, said Rep. Mike Nearman, R-Dallas.

"There's simply not a need for this to be done as a

matter of state law," he said. The bill was originally proposed as a means to give local governments in Oregon the power to regulate biotech crops.

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 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.

However, the original language of the bill was "guttled and stuffed" at the committee level with a labeling requirement for genetically engineered fish.

While the proposal to allow local restrictions on

biotech crops was removed from the bill, it may get resurrected in future legislation.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, said he wishes problems could be worked out amicably, but farmers who fear cross-pollination 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 during a previous committee hearing. "I hope the Department of Agriculture solves it or the Legislature does in the future."

Rep. 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.

Nearman said it would be unfortunate if the current system of voluntary cooperation among farmers was 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. Rep. Susan McLain, D-Hillsboro, said she agreed that an ideal solution would allow all types of farmers to co-exist.

"Let's not pre-empt that possible pathway," she said.

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Rep. Paul Holvey
D-Eugene

Marine mammal strandings concern experts

By LYRA FONTAINE
EO Media Group

CANNON BEACH — The humpback whale stranded in Seaside in January may have become entangled or struck by a boat, according to Debbie Duffield, a Portland State University biology professor.

More than 30 people gathered for a lecture, "Marine Mammals, the Marine Mammal Stranding Network and Marine Reserves," last week at the Cannon Beach Library.

The topic was particularly timely. In the past few weeks, a humpback whale washed ashore in Seaside, and a harbor porpoise and two striped dolphins were found on the North Coast. Experts are still waiting on necropsy results for the whale to see whether it was infected or if it had an accident.

The humpback has bruising that could have been from entanglement or a boat strike, Duffield said. It also carried a fairly heavy parasite load for a whale not more than 2 years old.

The presentation — a partnership between Duffield and Keith Chandler, the Seaside Aquarium general manager — was part of Haystack Rock Awareness Program's lecture series.

The Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network, which Duffield and Chandler belong to, responds to mammal strandings from Tillamook to Long Beach, Washington. They see 149 stranded animals a year on average. The most common animals include California sea lions, harbor seals and Steller sea lions.

Strandings allow researchers to evaluate otherwise inaccessible animals, and necropsies tell scientists vital physiological and biological information. Marine mammals' tissues are sampled and used for studies on ocean pollution, biotoxins and other environmental changes.

Once they evaluate a stranded animal, researchers take samples back to the university to study it in a controlled area and test for infections. After they finish the necropsies, they might prepare the bones for students to piece together.

"Every once in awhile we have species that, because of their charismatic value, are of great interest to everybody," Duffield said.

For example, a killer whale was stranded in Long Beach several years ago, drawing veterinarians, researchers and onlookers alike. Duffield also recalls when a Baird's beaked whale came in live in Seaside during a volleyball tournament. "Luckily, people weren't around it when it started to die and thrash, because it could have killed somebody," she said.

Why do these animals appear on shores? Seals, sea lions, whales, dolphins and porpoises are primarily stranded due to human interaction, such as gunshots, fisheries interaction and net entanglement. Bacterial disease, cancer and infections also cause strandings.

Sometimes the human-related interactions are extreme. Duffield displayed a jarring photo of a California sea lion that had part of its face destroyed by an explosive device.

She also showed a picture of plastics and debris on the Seaside beach. Sea lions get entangled in plastic bands, but since they bite, it's difficult for humans to help them remove bands and recover from wounds. In 2010, a dead whale stranded in Washington's Puget Sound beach had 50 gallons of material in its stomach that was mostly algae, but also human debris, such as sweatpants, plastic bags, duct tape and towels.

The Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network works to improve treatment and disentangle marine mammals

from debris and fishery gear.

Duffield said that the animals are resilient. Seals and sea lions often carry worms in their stomach that can form ulcers. "They just live with that," she said. "Their parasite loads are tremendous."

The strandings may also point to larger forces at work. The El Niño climate pattern that's increasing coastal temperatures, along with the warm "blob" of water in the north Pacific Ocean, affect the animals' prey.

"We're at the apex of these changes that we can actually follow annually," Duffield said. "It's a fascinating change that we're living through."



Neal Maine/For EO Media Group
Workmen move the humpback whale that washed ashore in Seaside.



Lyra Fontaine/EO Media Group
Debbie Duffield of Portland State University discusses marine mammal strandings as part of a Haystack Rock Awareness Program series.



Daily Astorian/File Photo
People stop to look at the dead humpback whale calf that washed ashore on the Seaside beach.



Lyra Fontaine/EO Media Group
Seaside Aquarium employees Mollie Schmidt and Tiffany Boothe with Debbie Duffield and Seaside Aquarium General Manager Keith Chandler.

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