

Lawmakers approve money for unemployment applicants

By **PETER WONG**
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon lawmakers have cleared the way for some unemployed people to obtain one-time checks of \$500 if they have been waiting for weeks to obtain unemployment benefits.

The Legislative Emergency Board voted Tuesday to approve a maximum of \$35 million for an estimated 70,000 claimants, most of

whom are newly eligible for benefits as a result of congressional action in March. Self-employed people, independent contractors, gig and temporary workers were ineligible for benefits before the coronavirus relief bill became law.

The checks will not count against future unemployment benefits, and unless fraud is involved, recipients will not have to repay the emergency aid.

More than 500,000 claims have been filed for regular benefits since mid-March, and most of that backlog was eliminated by early June. But federal law requires states to ensure that newly eligible workers for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance do not qualify for regular benefits.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, proposed the

\$35 million from the state’s \$1.4 billion share of aid from the coronavirus relief bill to offer some relief for applicants who have been waiting for weeks.

“I don’t want to blame the Employment Department,” Courtney said. “I want to do something.”

Kotek said details are still being worked out. But she said banks and other financial institutions are willing to take part, knowing that whatever

they pay out will be repaid by the state — and it’s not an issue of cash flow for them.

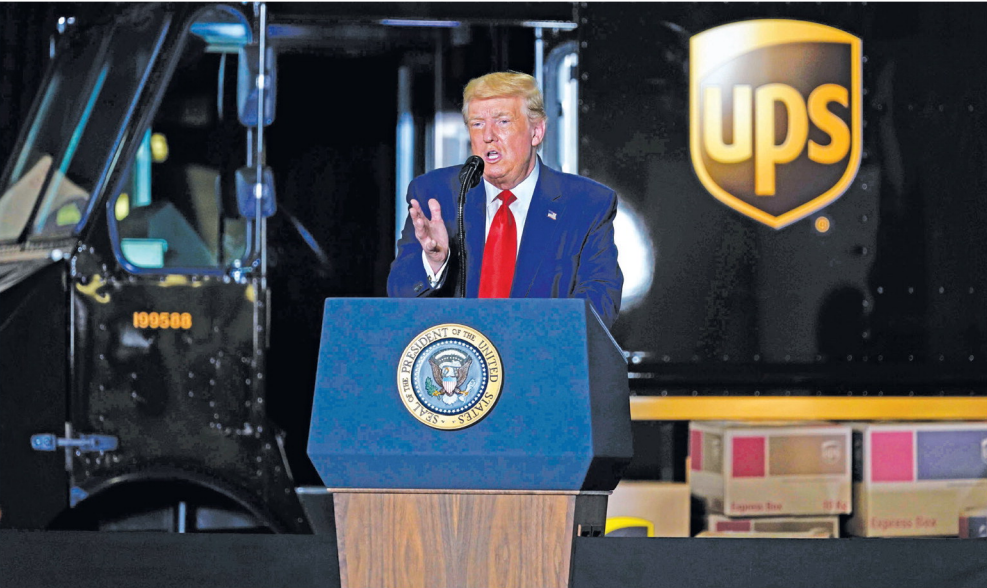
“If we set up an application process and eligibility criteria quickly, individuals could apply very soon ... and they could get paid,” she said.

Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, said she knows of people who have resorted to selling their cars and other possessions to stay afloat financially. But she said she

is concerned about the lack of a distribution process.

“These people have lost hope. They are absolutely frantic and desperate,” she said. “But if we say we have a finite amount of money and it’s first-come, first-served, I do not know what that is going to look like in the bank lobbies.”

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



President Donald Trump speaks during an event on American infrastructure at UPS Hapeville Airport Hub in Atlanta on Wednesday.

Trump to roll back environmental law for infrastructure projects

By **AAMER MADHANI**
and **KEVIN FREKING**
Associated Press

ATLANTA — President Donald Trump announced Wednesday that he was rolling back a foundational Nixon-era environmental law that he says stifles infrastructure projects, but that is credited with ensuring decades of scrutiny of major projects and giving local communities a say.

Trump was in Atlanta to announce changes to the National Environmental Policy Act’s regulations for how and when authorities must conduct environmental reviews, making it easier to build highways, pipelines, chemical and solar plants and other projects. The 1970 law changed environmental oversight in the United States by requiring federal agencies to consider whether a project would harm the air, land, water or wildlife, and giving the public the right of review and input. The president said the final rule will promote the rebuilding of America.

“Together we’re reclaiming America’s proud heritage as a nation of builders and a nation that can get things done,” Trump said.

Critics called the Republican president’s efforts a cynical attempt to limit the public’s ability to examine and influence proposed projects under one of the country’s bedrock environmental protection laws.

“This may be the single biggest giveaway to polluters in the past 40 years,” said Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that works to save endangered species.

Trump has made slashing government regulation a hallmark of his presidency and held it out as a way to boost jobs. Environmental groups say the regulatory rollbacks threaten public health and make it harder to curb global warming. With Congress and the administration divided over how to increase infrastructure investment, the president is relying on his deregulation push to demonstrate progress.

Among the major changes: limiting when federal environmental reviews of projects are mandated, and capping how long federal agencies and the public have to evaluate and comment on any environmental impact of a project.

“We won’t get certain projects through for environmental reasons. They have to be environmentally sound. But you know what?

We’re going to know in a year. We’re going to know in a year and a half. We’re not going to know in 20 years,” Trump said.

Opponents say the changes will have an inordinate impact predominantly on minority communities. More than 1 million African Americans live within a half-mile of natural gas facilities and face a cancer risk above the Environmental Protection Agency’s level of concern from toxins emitted by those facilities, according to a 2017 study by the Clean Air Task Force and the National Association for the Advancement

of Colored People.

“Donald Trump is taking away the last lines of defense for front-line communities, and continues to demonstrate a total disregard for our environment and for those demanding racial and environmental justice,” said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

Mustafa Santiago Ali, a former associate administrator in the Obama administration’s EPA environmental justice office, said Black and other minority communities “will pay with their health and ultimately with their lives” for the rules changes.

Merkley: Touched on the protests

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the contagion in so many Southern states.”

Merkley has asked Congress to spend \$2 billion in coronavirus relief on buying American seafood products. The seafood industry received \$300 million from the first \$2 trillion coronavirus relief package passed in March, but the senator has said that’s not enough for an industry that saw demand plummet with government restrictions on restaurants.

His proposal will target the types of fish usually sold at restaurants. In addition to the seafood purchases, his idea would pump \$1.5 billion into the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for targeted relief to damaged fisheries across the country.

Merkley said it will be difficult for coastal states with fisheries to get inland states to buy in to the proposal, but that they could combine similar ideas with other food sources.

Asked about protests around the country over police misconduct, Merk-

ley said community leaders need to continue to support the right to peacefully demonstrate, while emphasizing the unacceptability of destructive acts.

“We have both rights and responsibilities as citizens,” he said. “We have the right to assemble. We have the right to protest. That’s essential in a republic. But we have no right to start injuring people and destroying property.”

Merkley closed by saying

that the United States is in an extraordinary time.

“This is like living through a novel, an apocalyptic novel or movie, with the pandemic, with the implosion, with the much-needed conversation about discrimination and public safety quality,” he said. “But let’s use this to know that we have an opportunity that comes from these conversations in this moment to develop a better system, better laws.”

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