

Oregon House moves to curb forest institute's power and budget

By **TONY SCHICK**
and **ROB DAVIS**

*Oregon Public Broadcasting
and The Oregonian*

The Oregon House voted Tuesday to cut the Oregon Forest Resources Institute's budget by two-thirds and redirect the money to the type of climate science it tried to undermine, delivering a sharp rebuke to a tax-funded agency that a news investigation showed had attacked scientists and acted as a lobbying and public relations arm for the timber industry.

Representatives agreed in a 32-27 vote to increase oversight of the institute, end its public advertising campaign and shift \$2.7 million of its \$4 million annual budget to the Oregon Department of Forestry for projects including climate research in forests and assisting small landowners. The bill now moves to the Oregon Senate for consideration.

The Oregon Forest Resources Institute was created in 1991 to educate the public about forestry and to teach landowners about logging laws and sound environmental practices.

A joint investigation by The Oregonian, Oregon Public Broadcasting and ProPublica in August revealed that the institute had acted as a de-facto lobbying arm of the timber industry, in some cases skirting legal constraints that forbid it from doing so. The investigation showed that the organization attacked scientists studying carbon in Oregon's forests, with one top official calling them "folks who likely believe that the planet would be better off without humans."

State Rep. Khanh Pham, a Portland Democrat and one of the bill's sponsors, said she was outraged by the investigation's findings, praising the news organizations for exposing the institute's actions. She said she had received a flood of emails from constituents who wanted to see the insti-



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Logging trucks roll down Santiam Highway in front of the Detroit Ranger Station where about two dozen people gathered in April to protest the post-wildfire logging along fire-impacted roads impacted by the wildfires of 2020.

tute held accountable.

"It was alarming, frustrating and eye-opening where our public dollars were going," Pham said.

Lawmakers established a tax on logging to pay for the institute, at the same time cutting taxes paid by the timber industry that helped fund schools and local governments. The news organizations found that tax cuts for the timber industry had cost Oregon an estimated \$3 billion in lost revenue since 1991, which came at the expense of rural counties struggling to provide basic government services.

The Oregon Forest & Industries Council, the state trade group that wrote the bill creating the institute in 1991, has strongly opposed changes. Its lobbyists said the institute provides necessary promotion of one of Oregon's backbone industries.

"It would be a gross miscarriage of justice to eliminate

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the jobs of dedicated public employees for no reason other than a sensationalized newspaper story," Mike Eliason, an industry council lobbyist, said in testimony to lawmakers.

Lawmakers this session stalled in their efforts to reinstate a tax that large timber companies paid on the value of trees they logged. Timber tax policy is now more likely to be taken up by a task force or work group with the intent of crafting legislation for a future session, according to Rep. Paul Holvey, a Eugene Democrat, who sponsored the

bill to restore the tax.

Rep. Andrea Salinas, a Lake Oswego Democrat, said she was disappointed lawmakers haven't done more on timber taxes this session. Salinas, who sponsored the bill, said passing it took far more time than she anticipated.

"This felt so small. It should have been so easy," Salinas said of the bill. "There was a lot around how to restructure the severance tax and the harvest tax. Those feel really big and difficult now."

During more than 90 minutes of debate on the House

floor Tuesday, numerous lawmakers cited the news investigation and said the institute's actions demanded an immediate response.

In a speech on the house floor, bill co-sponsor Rep. Marty Wilde, a Eugene Democrat, told his colleagues he would have preferred to completely eliminate the institute. But some Democrats were reluctant. The final bill, Wilde said, is a "critical correction to an agency that veered far off course."

Rep. Susan McLain, a Hillsboro Democrat, said the legislative compromise that staved off the institute's elimination won her vote. She said her nieces and nephews had been through its "fabulous" educational programs for school children, which will remain as one of its core functions. She encouraged state senators to closely examine the bill.

"There were many compromises and there were

many good opportunities that were left on the table," she said. McLain did not expand on what she meant.

Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat who was the target of some of the institute's lobbying efforts, has called the investigation's findings "deeply troubling." House Speaker Tina Kotek has said she was "appalled" by the institute's attacks on scientific research.

Brown requested an audit by Oregon's Secretary of State that is expected to be completed in late June or early July. A spokesperson for Brown said the governor does not generally take positions on bills still working through the legislative process. In requesting the audit, Brown's office said such a probe was "necessary to bring transparency to whether OFRI conducts its mission in keeping with its statutory authority, including the clear prohibition on OFRI influencing, or attempting to influence state policy."

Lawmakers who opposed the bill said it would gut the institute and leave it without the ability to support one of the state's key rural industries.

Rep. Bill Post, R-Keizer, who voted no, urged his colleagues to wait for the results of an audit due this summer from the Oregon Secretary of State. "The Oregonian and OPB are not judge and jury in Oregon and good policy should not be based on the opinions of some journalists," Post said. The news organizations have published a piece that details the investigation, which was based on extensive interviews and documents.

Thousands of records obtained by the news organizations documented how the agency targeted university climate change research and spent millions of dollars on advertisements that promoted Oregon's logging laws as strong, even as they fell behind regulations in neighboring California and Washington.

Oregon requires coronavirus vaccines for farmed mink

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon's campaign to vaccinate the public against COVID-19 is extending to the animal kingdom.

The state Department of Agriculture has filed an emergency temporary rule requiring coronavirus vaccines for as many as 212,700 farmed mink to reduce the risk of new infections, virus mutations and possible animal-to-human transmission, the agency announced late last month.

Mink farmers have until Aug. 31 to vaccinate their animals. Any mink born or imported after that date must be vaccinated within 120 days of birth, or within 60 days of being brought into Oregon.

Farms must also agree to participate in additional surveillance testing per state Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines.

"ODA is taking the necessary precautions to reduce the risk of infection in captive mink, as well as reduce the risk of potential mutation of the virus and the potential for virus transmission back to humans," said Ryan Scholz, state veterinarian for the Department of Agriculture. "It is critical that owner-operators vaccinate their mink against the virus."

Surveillance testing will provide assurance the vaccine is effective, and infections are not occurring on farms, Scholz added.

The rule comes after one mink farm in Oregon was placed under quarantine for more than two months between late November and early February after multiple animals tested positive for the virus. Scholz said the



Fur Commission USA

The Oregon Department of Agriculture has filed an emergency temporary rule requiring Oregon mink operators to vaccinate all captive mink against the coronavirus.

mink had likely contracted the virus from workers at the farm.

The state did not identify the farm for security reasons. The positive tests prompted concern about the possibility of a "viral reservoir" among captive mink spilling into the wild and infecting related species like river otters, fishers and martens.

After two consecutive rounds of follow-up testing at the farm revealed no new cases, the quarantine was lifted on Feb. 11.

The approved vaccine for minks was developed by Zoetis, the world's largest producer of medicine and vaccinations for pets and livestock. The company, based in New Jersey, worked with Fur Commission USA, which represents U.S. mink farmers, on clinical testing for the vaccine last year.

Michael Whelan, executive director of Fur Commission USA, said mink farmers were already working toward vaccinating their animals even before the Oregon rule was announced.

"We see the importance of keeping the mink healthy, keeping the workers healthy and keeping the public

healthy," Whelan said.

Farmers will bear the expense of vaccinating their own animals, Whelan said. Like the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine for humans, the Zoetis vaccine for minks requires two rounds of shots. The cost works out to about 77 cents per mink.

State Department of Agriculture spokeswoman Andrea Cantu-Schomus said Oregon has a maximum permitted capacity of 212,700 animals at registered mink farms, though the actual count is likely lower.

Fur Commission USA is assisting in the distribution of vaccines to veterinarians. The first phase of vaccinations in Oregon will likely begin this week, Whelan said.

In addition, Whelan said the USDA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are in the process of developing national protocols that will likely require vaccinating all mink nationwide. As of 2018, the U.S. had 245 mink farms in 22 states that produced 3.1 million pelts, according to the commission.

"Oregon was quicker to make an emergency rule because of the outbreak, but all mink in the country will be vaccinated before the end of July," Whelan said.

As of December 2020, eight countries have reported cases of the coronavirus in farmed mink, including the U.S. Perhaps the most serious outbreak was in Denmark, where authorities ordered the entire farmed mink population of up to 17 million animals slaughtered.

Denmark also banned mink farming and breeding until at least 2022 after discovering a new strain of the virus that can be passed to humans, called the "Cluster 5" strain.

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