

POWER: Project could cost \$880-\$940 million

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rigated circles, he said. At 125 acres per circle and \$15,000 per acre, that's more than \$13 million in lost value. "The cumulative effects are crippling to us," Reeder said. As proposed, the Boardman to Hemingway transmission line would begin at Portland General Electric's Grassland Substation, under construction as part of a new natural gas-fired power plant near the existing Boardman Coal Plant. From there, the line crosses five Eastern Oregon counties before ending at a substation southwest of Boise. The draft environmental report splits the project into six segments, with a range of alternatives in each segment. Each alternative is meant to mitigate effects to farmland, forests, endangered species and cultural resources. Scott Whitesides, environmental planner with the BLM, said the primary concern in northeast Oregon is

farming, which makes up a significant part of the local economy. "Primarily, it's about loss of acreage because (Idaho Power will) have that right-of-way," Whitesides said. The draft EIS is not a decision-making document, Whitesides said, and residents now have 90 days to weigh in before the cooperating agencies — which include the Forest Service and Bureau of Reclamation — issue their final record of decision. Earl Aylett, a farmer in both Morrow and Umatilla counties, said the project would interrupt agriculture immensely and questioned whether the line is actually needed. "The line goes through a lot of land to get where it's going, at very little benefit to the people where it goes through," Aylett said. "It's not something I want." Boardman to Hemingway was first identified in Idaho Power's 2006 integrated resource plan as a means to alleviate constraints on exist-

ing transmission lines. The Columbia Basin and southern Idaho share power across the grid during times of peak demand, which alternate between winter and summer months, respectively. The project is needed to ensure reliability of customers' growing power demands, said manager Todd Adams, as well as keeping rates affordable. At the same time, he said the company sympathizes with farmers and will continue work to mitigate the burden placed on them. "There's been a lot of valid concern," Adams said. "We know nobody appreciates a power line except the power company." The final EIS will include a preferred alternative that is the result of compromise between all agencies and affected landowners. Adams said they will push for a route that runs along the west side of Bombing Range Road, though that will take some negotiating with the U.S. Navy. The Grassland Substation alternative would also avoid any impacts to the

Boardman Tree Farm. Idaho Power hopes to have both state and federal permitting done as early as 2018, with the project up and running by 2020. Depending on the final route, it could cost between \$880-\$940 million. Company spokeswoman Stephanie McCurdy said they are trying their best to make everyone happy, but in reality that's a tall order to fill. "People want the lights to come on when they flip the switch," McCurdy said. "There have to be larger compromises in order to make that happen, and building a transmission line is one way to do it." The public has until March 19 to comment on the draft EIS. More information, including a schedule of project meetings and virtual open house, is available online at www.boardmantohemingway.com.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4547.

LABOR: Wants to raise Oregon's minimum wage

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"We have come to the realization that these long-standing systemic problems have got to come to an end." On his priority list for 2015:

- More money for state grants to public schools to re-establish career and technical education.
- An increase in Oregon's minimum wage, now \$9.25 per hour, to around \$12 to enable workers to exceed the federal poverty level.
- More legal tools to combat wage theft, when businesses fail to pay workers what they have earned.
- Several steps to implement pay equity among men and women, and minorities, including paid sick leave.

More career programs

When Avakian began his push for state grants in 2011, many public schools had dropped shop classes and other forms of career and technical education not connected with college preparation. Four years and almost \$14 million later, more than 200 Oregon schools have re-established such programs as part of a joint effort of the Bureau of Labor and Industries, the state Department of Education, and businesses.

Avakian said it's a priority that unites Democrats and Republicans, labor unions and businesses, and educators at all levels. "What it really means is providing great pathways to good-paying jobs, and providing Oregon businesses with exactly what they need from good local workers to produce the goods and services they sell," he said. "The good news is that everybody is talking about doing something and wanting to advance it." Gov. John Kitzhaber's budget proposes money for expanded career and technical education, and Avakian says he would like to see

lawmakers set aside \$50 million to continue such grants. **Minimum wage** In contrast, the looming debate about a minimum-wage increase is likely to be more contentious. Oregon's wage just rose from \$9.10 to \$9.25 per hour, second only to Washington's \$9.47, as a result of an automatic linkage that voters approved in 2002 to the Consumer Price Index. "I think it's important that our policy should be to make sure that nobody who is working full time and is raising a family is living below the federal poverty level," Avakian said. At the current rate of \$9.25, a full-time minimum-wage worker would earn \$19,240 annually, slightly less than the \$19,790 that was the 2014 federal poverty level for a household of three. (New levels for 2015 will be announced soon.)

At a rate of \$12, that same worker would earn \$25,000, well above the federal poverty level. Future increases, Avakian said, should continue to be linked to inflation. Avakian said an increase would not only benefit 450,000 Oregon workers, it would give them additional purchasing power of almost \$250 million that would boost businesses. Avakian said he isn't wedded to a figure — a Portland-based coalition wants the minimum wage to go to \$15, which Seattle will have in 2018 — but that whatever it is, it should be statewide. The coalition also wants to repeal a 2001 law that bars Oregon cities and counties from setting their own minimums. "I am glad to see so many folks having a discussion about raising the minimum wage," he said. "It's really a sign of families still struggling. What you are really getting at is making sure that everybody has the ability to get ahead and do well."

BUSINESS: Approved \$76,000 assessment for new fire station

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Linda Carter spoke out against the amendment not as an attendee but as a Round-Up vendor. Because she lives three miles outside Pendleton city limits, Carter said she paid the out-of-town fee. In talking with other vendors, Carter said an increase to the fees would cut into the merchants' already modest profit margins. Carter said she's already dealt with fee raises and new requirements in the past and recommended the ordinance be left alone. Councilman Al Plute agreed. "We have bigger fish to fry," he said. "These are small potatoes." Councilwoman Becky Marks said the council should at least look into prorating permanent business fees, which would demonstrate to potential investors that Pendleton was business friendly. Except Councilman Chuck Wood, Marks couldn't find additional support to her view. The council voted 6-2 to table the amendment. Other issues discussed during the meeting:

- The council also unanimously approved finalizing a contract with the design firm Mackenzie to perform a \$76,000 needs assessment for a new fire station as a part of a capital improvement bond.
- The council unanimously appointed Councilman Neil Brown as council president, taking over for Tom Young. Brown will preside over meetings if



Photo by Antonio Sierra
Councilors McKennon McDonald, left, Al Plute and John Brenne sign documents after being sworn-in at a Pendleton City Council meeting Tuesday.

Mayor Phillip Houk is absent.

- Four councilors elected in November 2014 were sworn in at the meeting, including new Councilwoman McKennon McDonald.
- Houk made appointments to seven committees at the meeting, which were all unanimously approved.

 The most significant move was replacing Mike Thorne on the Airport Commission with East Oregon Community Bank commercial lender Mike Short.

Houk said he would have to find replacements for the open vacancies left behind by Tyson Furstenberg and Lou Porter, who sat on the Planning Commission and the Capital Improvement Program Commission, respectively. Fifteen committee members were reconfirmed while Houk waits on responses from three other committee members. Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

WILDLIFE: Sage grouse occupy 290,000 square miles of habitat

Continued from 1A

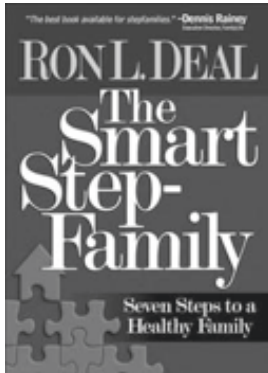
It can take decades for sagebrush to return, though nonnative plants often move in first, only to burn a few years later. Jewell's order is an attempt to stop that cycle and protect the sagebrush steppe that generally is considered part of the iconic Western landscape. "It's the Western way of life," Schneider said. "We should be taking all the steps to protect this way of life and the economic engine it supports to make sure it's around a really long time." Population estimates for greater sage grouse range from 100,000 to 500,000 birds. They occupy 290,000 square miles of habitat in

California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, Alberta and Saskatchewan. The species already has put on hold development of wind farms and oil and gas drilling plans in some areas. Experts say an endangered species listing for the sage grouse could damage Western states' economies. Last month, President Barack Obama signed a \$1.1 trillion spending bill with a provision that barred money from being spent on rules to protect the chicken-sized bird and three related types of grouse. Interior officials later said U.S. wildlife officials would

continue analyzing sage grouse data and make a decision on whether protections are warranted by fall. Jewell instructed the task force to work with federal, state and local agencies to consider priorities on where firefighting resources are sent, find ways to fight fire-prone invasive species, and devise strategies to recover burned areas. Her order stemmed at least in part from a November conference in Boise organized by Schneider. The meeting brought together scientists and land managers to find collaborative ways to protect Great Basin rangelands from the plague of wildfires that have been

increasing in intensity. One of the possible changes suggested at the conference by BLM Director Neil Komze was to put the protection of rangeland resources ahead of property. The protection of human life would remain the top priority.

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