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Overturn of provider tax could cost state more than \$840M

By **CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE**
Capital Bureau

SALEM — If Oregon voters overturn aspects of the state’s health care funding law in January, state government could see its expected revenues drop by \$840 million or more.

Three Republican lawmakers want to refer sections of the law — which establishes assorted revenues to help Oregon pay for its Medicaid program — to voters.

The petitioners must gather nearly 59,000 signatures by Oct. 5 to get the petition to the ballot in a January special election.

A financial estimate of the impact of partial repeal of the law — what voters will see if the issue gets to the ballot — was approved, after some dispute over terminology, by a five-member committee of public officials at the Capitol Friday morning.

The estimate states that if the bill were partially overturned, there would be a reduction in state revenues between \$210 million and \$320 million, resulting in a potential reduction in matching federal funds from \$630 million to \$960 million or more.

The petitioners want to challenge what they are framing as a “sales tax” on health care, and what their opponents maintain are standard assessments on health care providers that pay for the Oregon Health Plan, the state’s Medicaid program.

The law that petitioners want to partially repeal includes a mechanism often referred to as a “provider tax.”

Under this mechanism — employed by every state except Alaska to help pay for Medicaid — states collect payments from health care providers in order to pay their share of Medicaid costs.

The dollars that a state collects through these payments are matched by the federal government. The combined pool of federal and state money is distributed back to providers for serving Medicaid patients.

See **TAX/10A**

WOLVES MOVING IN

Numbers growing in Mount Emily, Meacham

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
East Oregonian

A misty rain fell Wednesday morning in the Blue Mountains east of Pendleton, where Greg Rimbach drove the muddy forest roads scanning for wolf tracks.

“Once you see one, now you’re an expert,” said Rimbach, district wildlife biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. “When they want to go somewhere, they like walking along roads down ridges. It’s just easier.”

Since wolves dispersed from Idaho and returned to northeast Oregon in the late 1990s, more of the predators are settling and forming packs in the Walla Walla and Mount Emily wildlife units. The district is now home to seven packs or groups of wolves totaling at least 36 animals — nearly one-third of the state’s known wolf population.

Rimbach figures he spends a quarter of his workdays managing wolves, from trapping and collaring to investigating claims of livestock predation. His latest project involves finding and re-collaring OR-11, a male wolf from the Walla Walla pack that initially split to form the Mount Emily pack, and has split once again and paired up with a new mate at the south end of the Mount Emily Unit.

The trajectory of increased wolf activity comes as no surprise to Rimbach.

“This is absolutely what we expected,” he said. “It certainly is tracking with what other states have seen.”

Meacham pack

The presence of wolves, however, remains a polarizing issue as ranchers content with live-



The Mt. Emily Summit Road runs through the territory of three known wolf packs in the Umatilla National Forest near Meacham.

stock losses. Most recently, ODFW determined the Meacham pack was responsible for attacking cattle four times in eight days last month on the same 4,000-acre private pasture owned by Cunningham Sheep Company.

Predations occurred less than a mile from Interstate 84, and two miles from the community of Meacham. In response, ODFW issued a limited duration wolf kill permit, allowing Cunningham Sheep to shoot two adult or sub-adult wolves on sight within the densely forested pasture.

One of the wolves, a non-breeding female, was shot Sept. 7. The action sparked a wave of anger on both sides of the debate, with environmental groups criticizing ODFW for allowing any wolves to be killed and the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association arguing the entire pack should be removed.

Wolf-livestock conflicts were anticipated when wolves reentered Oregon, Rimbach said. That is why ranchers and environmentalists were both included at the

See **WOLVES/10A**



A collared wolf is photographed in the Mount Emily area in northeast Oregon.

Photo contributed by ODFW.

Wolf pack numbers

The Walla Walla and Mount Emily wildlife management units are home to seven wolf packs, pairs or groups of wolves totaling at least 36 known animals, according to the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. Estimates include:

- Walla Walla pack: 11 known
- Mount Emily pack: 8 known
- Meacham pack: 7 known
- North Emily wolves: 3 known
- OR-52 group: 3 known
- OR-11 pair: 2 known
- OR-30 pair: 2 known

Wisps of clouds rise up over the home territory of the Meacham wolf pack in the Umatilla National Forest northeast of Meacham.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



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