

# O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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## OUR VIEW

## SNAP a wild card in new farm bill

Republicans in the House Agriculture Committee recently passed a draft of the next farm bill on a partisan vote.

As in past years, the issues dividing Republicans and Democrats are the welfare components of the legislation.

Democrats want to take back the House and the Senate in November. To accomplish this “blue wave” they’ll need to turn a lot of districts in farm country — districts that voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election. Both Democrats and Republicans want to protect farmers, so you’d think it would be a snap to pass a new farm bill.

It turns out that rather than being a snap, it is wrangling over SNAP — the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — that led to the partisan committee vote. SNAP, what used to be known as food stamps, is a \$68 billion a year program that accounts for 69 percent of domestic food programs.

SNAP and other nutrition programs make up 80 percent of what we think is inaccurately called the farm bill.

Republicans attached language in the new bill that would require most able-bodied SNAP recipients to either work or be enrolled in a work training program to qualify for assistance. That’s a nonstarter for Democrats.

We won’t weigh in on the pros and cons of asking those who are getting assistance to make some effort towards employment. But we have trouble seeing the benefits of folding social welfare programs into the farm bill.

Decades ago Congress decided to put food stamp and school lunch funding into the farm bill.

The thinking goes that urban legislators don’t really care much for commodity subsidies, crop insurance and dairy pricing, but they do care about nutrition programs that impact their constituents. Lumped in with the



USDA  
SNAP electronic benefits cards from around the nation. The program is one of several non-agricultural programs that make up the lion’s share of the farm bill — and spark the most divisiveness in Congress.

welfare programs urban legislators do care about, the farm expenditures seem like small potatoes that aren’t worth a fight.

We admit there was probably some logic behind that thinking. But in practice, the thing that was supposed to grease the skids seems to always throw the farm bill off the rails.

The 2008 Farm Bill was set to expire in September 2012. In order to avoid running into election season, Democrats who controlled Congress began working on a new bill in 2011. It wasn’t

until 2014 that a bill was passed, mostly because of partisan differences on how much to fund nutrition programs.

It’s too early to tell if the “2018 Farm Bill” will suffer the same fate. But it is another election year and politics are even more divisive than five years ago.

We can’t help but wonder, as we did in 2013, whether farmers and ranchers would be better served by a relatively modest bill that stands on its own than rather than being held hostage by partisan wrangling over welfare spending.

## OTHER VIEWS

## Time to end the secrecy

On Jan. 24, 2017, then-national security adviser Michael Flynn was questioned by the FBI in his White House office. The session, focusing on Flynn’s transition talks with the Russian ambassador, led to Flynn pleading guilty to a charge of lying to investigators. He is now awaiting sentencing.

But why did FBI agents go to the White House in the first place? We still don’t know precisely, because we have only snippets of information from the various Trump-Russia investigations. There’s no reason it should be a big secret, but it is.

Newly unredacted portions of the House Intelligence Committee Republicans’ Trump-Russia report say top Justice Department and FBI officials — Sally Yates, James Comey, Andrew McCabe and Mary McCord — gave “conflicting testimony” about the “primary purpose” for sending the FBI to question Flynn.

Some said the reason for interviewing Flynn was “investigating potentially misleading statements to the vice president,” according to the report. Some said it was investigating “a possible violation of the Logan Act.” And some said it was “a desire to obtain more information as part of the counterintelligence investigation” into Flynn.

Who said what? It’s impossible to know, because the committee has not released the interviews it conducted with each of those players in the Flynn affair. And we’re lucky to know what little we know; the intelligence community originally blacked out the portion of the report that said Yates, et al, gave conflicting accounts. Even that was a secret until the last few days.

Beyond the specific issue of the Flynn questioning, the Republican report’s little snippets of quotations and characterizations of testimony leave much untold. They also leave many wondering whether the GOP told the whole story of what its investigators gathered.

In their minority report, House Intelligence Committee Democrats included a few passages from interviews with key figures — former Office of National Intelligence chief James Clapper on his contacts with the press, McCabe on the Logan Act, and more. But of course, the brief passages are just the ones Democrats want the public to see. Like Republicans, they leave a lot out.

The bottom line is that the public still does not know what many important players have told the House about the Trump-Russia affair.

The solution is obvious and simple: Release the transcripts of the committee’s witness interviews. Among others, the committee questioned Donald Trump Jr., Jared Kushner, Michael Cohen, Corey Lewandowski, Steve Bannon, Rick Gates,



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Hope Hicks, Sam Clovis, Stephen Miller, K.T. McFarland, Roger Stone, Jeff Sessions, Carter Page, Erik Prince, J.D. Gordon, Reince Priebus and Sean Spicer. It would be a public service — actually, it is a public responsibility — for the committee to release those interviews.

A good example is about to be set by the Senate Judiciary Committee. One of the areas that panel has

focused on is the much-discussed June 9, 2016 meeting in Trump Tower. Committee investigators questioned six of the participants, including Trump Jr., music promoter Rob Goldstone and the translator who heard it all. (The committee received written answers to questions from Natalia Veselnitskaya, the Russian lawyer at the center of the meeting.) The transcripts of those interviews remain secret.

Capitol Hill’s secrecy is nothing compared to that of special counsel Robert Mueller, whose lawyers recently declined to tell a federal judge in open court what their investigation is about. It happened in a hearing in the case of former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort, who has been charged with financial crimes unrelated to the Trump campaign and the 2016 election.

In court, Mueller prosecutor Michael Dreeben essentially admitted that the May 17, 2017, order appointing Mueller and stating the subject of the investigation was just for show. Mueller’s real assignment — the factual statement defining the limits of his investigation — remains a secret. “The regulations nowhere say that a specific factual statement needs to be provided publicly,” Dreeben said.

Mueller got his marching orders, Dreeben said, in secret conversations with deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein. “The specific factual statement ... was conveyed to the special counsel upon his appointment in ongoing discussions that defined the parameters of the investigation.” It was all done in secret.

Federal District Judge T.S. Ellis’ incredulous reply was simple: “Come on, man.” Ellis ordered Dreeben to show him the special counsel’s complete assignment. That’s a good thing — but of course, it will happen in secret. The public still won’t know.

And that has been the problem with this investigation, going back to the beginning. In February, I wrote that in the Trump-Russia probe, “Too much material is secret, too much is classified, and too many attacks are launched and defenses mounted with too little public knowledge of the underlying facts.”

That’s still true, and becoming more so every day.

Byron York is chief political correspondent for *The Washington Examiner*.

## MORAL COMPASS



## OTHER VIEWS

## Will Oregon tax plan lead to mischief?

By Corvallis Gazette-Times

We’re just a couple of weeks away from May 21, the date when Gov. Kate Brown has summoned legislators for a one-day special session to consider her proposal for lower tax rates for some small businesses.

For fans of political posturing, this special session could well turn into a special occasion, as legislators and other elected officials pivot toward November’s general election.

For fans of tax reform that could benefit a range of Oregon small businesses, the session might not turn out to be all that special.

Here’s the background, if you’re just getting up to speed on this issue: Last month, Brown signed a tax measure, Senate Bill 1528, which was the subject of considerable partisan debate during this year’s legislative session.

Here’s what you need to know about the measure: Oregon’s tax code is connected to its federal counterpart, so any tax reform enacted at the federal level, such as the measure passed last year by Congress, generally is duplicated in the state tax system. Last year’s federal tax reform included a provision allowing owners of so-called “pass-through” businesses to deduct as much as 20 percent of their business income on federal tax returns.

Since the federal tax system is connected to Oregon’s tax code, owners of those businesses were in line to take the same deduction on their state returns. But the Legislature, without a single vote from a Republican, approved Senate Bill 1528, which breaks the connection between the federal tax reform and the state tax code on this particular provision.

The state winds up pocketing an additional \$244 million in tax revenue, money that Brown said the state desperately needs. But as Brown announced her intention to sign the bill, she also said she planned to call the Legislature back into

session to consider her proposal to give a tax break to sole proprietorships, which had been left out of a previous tax break, passed in 2013.

Give the governor credit for what amounts to a clever attempt to thread the tax needle: The state, which faces yet another budget shortfall next year (despite what will almost certainly be record revenue), pockets millions to start filling the gap. Brown’s tax proposal, which is estimated to cost the state about \$11 million, doesn’t make that budget hole much deeper.

And, maybe most important from the governor’s point of view, she gets to cast herself as a friend to Oregon’s small businesses as she hits the re-election trail, perhaps taking some of the wind out of the sails of her GOP opponent.

Brown’s proposal has a couple of problems, though: First, as we’ve noted, an analysis of the proposal suggested that her tax break wouldn’t give relief to that many businesses: About 12,000 tax filers would qualify. That number has increased from earlier analyses, but it still works out to just 4.3 percent of Oregon’s sole proprietors.

And now this: An analysis from the Legislative Revenue Office released last week found that Brown’s tax break would mostly benefit those sole proprietors earning at least \$200,000 a year. Less than 10 percent of the estimated \$11 million tax cut would go to sole proprietors earning less than \$100,000 a year.

A tax break that benefits mostly the wealthy? That does start to sound like the tax reform measure Congress passed last year — not something that comes from the desk of a governor who’s positioned herself on the front lines of the opposition to President Donald Trump.

It all adds to the potential of a mischief-filled special session in two weeks’ time — not the quick one-day event that Brown would prefer. And it all begs this question: Isn’t it time our election officials and candidates got serious about floating plans for real tax reform? Just asking.