

Deadlock may forestall expanded Oregon hemp authority

State’s hemp farmers may come under direct oversight of USDA

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — The legislative deadlock may forestall upgrades to Oregon’s regulatory powers over hemp that are needed to meet federal requirements for the crop.

Without the enhanced authority for Oregon farm regulators, the state’s hemp farmers may come under the direct oversight of the USDA as soon as this autumn.

That outcome would be undesirable for the state’s hemp industry, which has thrived under the regulatory jurisdiction of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said Courtney Moran, attorney and president of the Oregon Industrial Hemp Farmers Association.

“We’ve worked very hard over the past five years to develop the Oregon hemp program,” Moran said. “We want to maintain that leadership.”

Currently, Oregon farm regulators have federal jurisdiction over hemp under the 2014 Farm Bill, which allowed the crop to be grown under state pilot programs.

The 2018 Farm Bill legalized hemp at the national level, requiring states to eventually conform with new federal rules for the crop.

The state Department of Agriculture needs enhanced authority, such as conducting criminal back-



Capital Press Photo/George Plaven, File

Oregon farm regulators won’t get a needed authority enhancement over hemp if a bill is forestalled by the legislative deadlock.

ground checks, to meet the USDA’s regulatory requirements to oversee hemp under the 2018 Farm Bill.

For that reason, lawmakers tried to pass House Bill 4072 during this year’s legislative session, which would fully vest ODA with the powers required by the federal government.

However, as Republican law-

makers recently refused to participate in the legislative process to avoid a vote on controversial climate legislation, HB 4072’s chances of passage are now dubious.

The hemp industry would push for the bill to be included on a priority list of must-pass legislation if Republican lawmakers

return to the Legislature before its required adjournment on March 8, said Moran of the Hemp Farmers Association.

It’s also possible that a similar hemp bill could be proposed during a special session called afterward by Gov. Kate Brown, she said.

Even if such legislation fails to pass in 2020, though, that won’t

immediately affect this year’s crop for growers. The ODA can continue regulating hemp under the 2014 Farm Bill until the end of October, after it’s harvested.

What would happen afterward is less certain, since the authority to grow hemp under the 2014 Farm Bill is set to expire on Oct. 31. Without an extension or an approved state plan, the crop would then come under federal jurisdiction.

It’s possible the USDA will extend Oregon’s ability to regulate hemp under the previous farm bill, said Lauren Henderson, the agency’s assistant director. “They know we’re waiting for legislation, like a lot of other states are.”

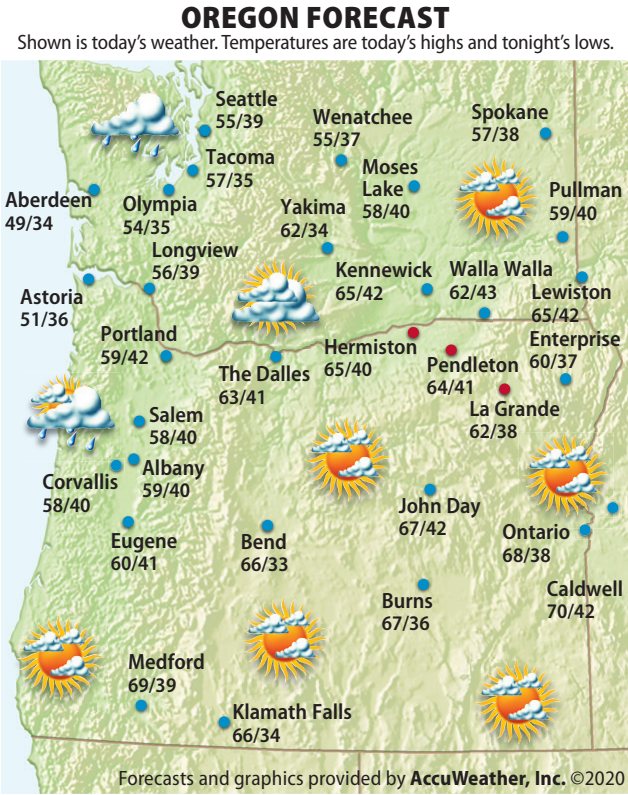
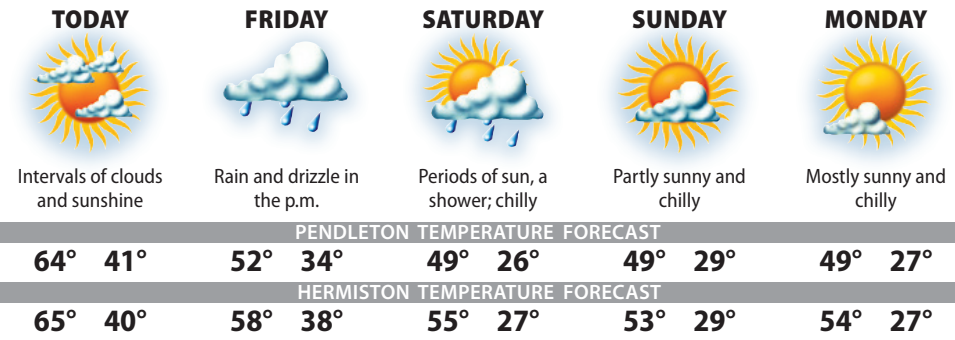
Some of the USDA’s requirements, such as registering hemp farmers, are already met by ODA’s existing authorities, and the state agency will retain its current state authority over the crop even without new legislation, Henderson said.

“That’s not going away,” he said. “We already have many boxes checked.”

It hasn’t yet been determined what role Oregon farm regulators would play if USDA did take direct authority over hemp, he said. The agency plans to discuss this eventuality with USDA, and the federal government has committed to working with the states.

“I don’t think there needs to be panic in the industry or anywhere else about the bill passing or not passing,” Henderson said.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

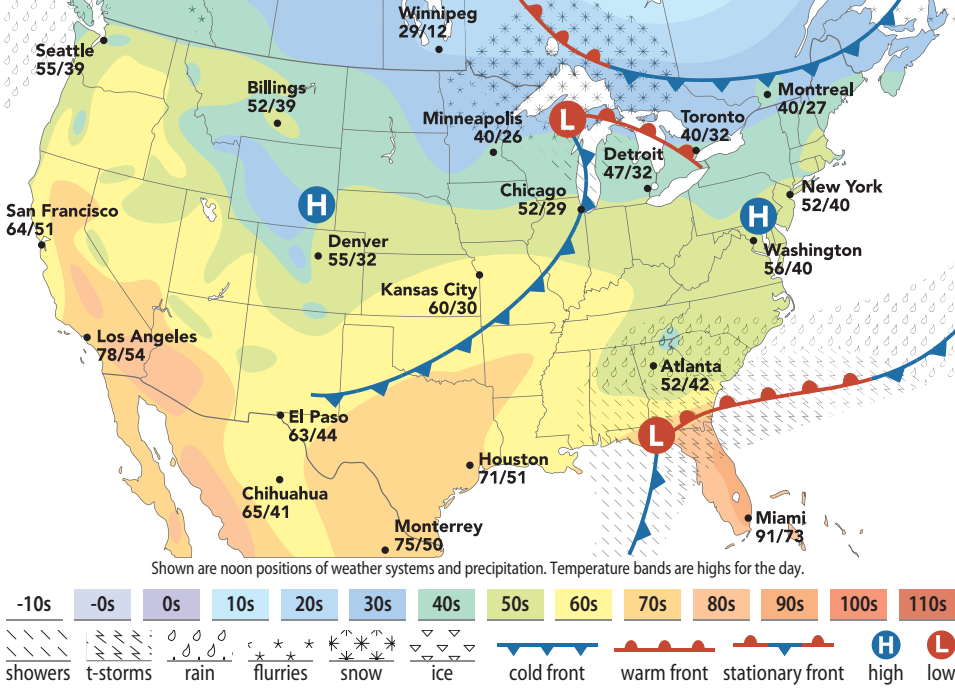


NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 91° in Immokalee, Fla. Low -10° in Crested Butte, Colo.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Work underway to fix city of Walla Walla's water line broken in flood

By CHLOE LEVALLEY
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — In the midst of Mill Creek flooding in early February, portions of the city’s drinking water line were broken upstream of Walla Walla in Oregon, according to officials.

Part of Mill Creek Road became the channel for Mill Creek thanks to the flooding, and this violent change in the water’s pathway broke sections of the line that supplies water to the treatment plant, and then to residents of the city, according to staff.

The city is now using two of its seven wells through the Aquifer Storage and Recovery program to supply water to residents. This water was treated before the flooding and is safe to drink, according to officials.

The creek must be routed back into its former channel before the water line can be repaired or replaced, according to city staff.

The Public Works Department is currently coordinating with other agencies to restore this line.

Damage involved about 1,400 feet of the 14-mile water line, said Ki Bealey, public works director. The repair project is going out to bid this week.

“Determining the actual amount of repair is part of the contract because we cannot see all of the damage to the line,” he said.

The line is estimated to be back in service sometime in May, Bealey said.

The Aquifer Storage and Recovery program was established in 1999 and involves injecting treated drinking water from the watershed into

the wells for recovery at a later date when needed, according to the city’s website.

City well water goes through the same purification and testing process as surface water, city staff said. The wells are capable of meeting the city’s water needs for up to 10 years.

City staff submitted a damage assessment for \$2.5 million for all of the damages and costs during the flooding event, Bealey said. The preliminary damage assessment for the water line was around \$1.5 million.

Other damages include a water system the city operates up Mill Creek for \$250,000; the communication line between the water plant and the intake for \$100,000; and the cost to pump water from the wells until the surface water system is back online for \$380,000, he said.

BRIEFLY

Joseph gym to remain standing after fire

JOSEPH — Joseph Charter School’s gymnasium will not have to be demolished to be restored in the wake of a Jan. 18 fire.

Superintendent Lance Homan said Tuesday the district has received an engineer’s report assessing the damage.

“It looks like the beams were not compromised,” he said.

But the gym’s interior will have to be gutted and rebuilt. That includes the basketball court and bleachers on the ground floor, and the weight room and wrestling facilities on the upper floor. But the building’s structural integrity is sound.

At present, the school’s cafeteria still is being cleaned, as are some classrooms. Then work will begin removing the charred portions of the gym and cleaning it before construction can begin.

Homan said he does not have a timeline for completion of the work, which may not be finished by the time school starts in the fall.

“That would be ideal, but we really don’t

know at this point,” he said. “Maybe as we get closer to summer, we’ll have a better idea.”

Statewide unemployment declined in January

SALEM — Oregon’s unemployment rate dropped to 3.3% in January, the lowest rate in 44 years, the state Employment Department stated Tuesday.

By comparison, the U.S. unemployment rate was 3.6% for the same period in 2019.

In Oregon, the number of nonfarm jobs declined by 1,800 in January. There were increases in health care and social assistance jobs, according to the Oregon Employment Department. Losses were reported in professional and business services, construction and manufacturing.

In 2019, the industries with the largest job gains were transportation, warehousing and utilities, according to the data. These industries expanded by 2,500 jobs, growing 3.6%.

— EO Media Group

CORRECTIONS: In a Page A8 story about the Class 2A boys state tournament, published Wednesday, March 4, the headline misspelled Toledo.

The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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