

Nurses would get more support under Oregon legislative plan

By SAM STITES
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — In a rare show of vigorous bipartisanship, the Oregon House of Representatives unanimously approved a bill on Friday, Feb. 25, to support nurses and address the state's ongoing nursing staff shortage.

If approved by the Senate, House Bill 4003 would direct the state to issue nursing intern licenses to students meeting certain qualifications and allow them to practice under the supervision of a registered nurse.

It would allow nursing interns to receive pay and

school credit if their institution allows, and it would expand programs supporting the mental health and overall wellness of nurses in Oregon's health care industry. It also extends a provision put in place by the state during the pandemic allowing emergency licensure of nurses for an additional 90 days following the end of Oregon's public health emergency declaration on April 1.

The proposal comes from Rep. Rachel Prusak, D-West Linn, who is a nurse. She worked with groups representing nurses and health care workers to craft the bill in response to staffing short-

ages and challenges nurses are facing that were identified before the pandemic and have worsened during the COVID-19 crisis.

"I have seen firsthand the stress this pandemic has placed on our already overburdened health care system, and I knew the Legislature had to take action to avoid further depleting our health care workers," Prusak said.

According to a 2018 analysis by the Oregon Employment Department, Oregon was projected to need an additional 2,600 nurses each year over the next decade to replace those leaving the industry. Data from 2019 shows the

state's nursing programs produced only around 1,500 new nurses ready to enter the workforce that year.

The pandemic has placed additional pressure on schools to produce more nurses and hospitals to find ways to retain them.

The bill has the support of several statewide organizations representing nurses and health care workers, including the Oregon Nurses Association, Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems, Oregon Center for Nursing and Oregon Primary Care Association.

Diane Solomon, a psychiatric mental health nurse

practitioner representing the Oregon Nurses Association, told lawmakers earlier this month that Oregon is "hemorrhaging" nurses.

"HB 4003 will help meet the needs of recruitment, as well as retention of a veteran, experienced workforce with essential skills," Solomon said. "Funding expansion of the successful Oregon Wellness Program to include nurses will absolutely offer intensely needed mental health care. In this way, nurses will be able to keep working without sacrificing their own health and mental health."

Prusak said she was proud to have shepherded the bill

through the House with such widespread support, and she's confident it will have the same warm reception in the Senate.

Rep. Travis Nelson, D-North Portland — a fellow nurse and one of the Legislature's newest members — said the past two years have been devastating for nurses on the front lines fighting COVID-19.

He said this bill will make both short- and long-term progress in providing solutions for the nursing staff crisis in Oregon.

It now heads to the Senate for consideration. Lawmakers have until March 7 to pass bills.

Permits to be required to drive the Historic Columbia River Highway

By JAMIE HALE
The Oregonian

SALEM — Looking to take a drive along the Historic Columbia River Highway this summer? You'll need a permit for that.

Timed entry permits will be required along the "waterfall corridor" of the scenic Columbia River Gorge highway between May 24 and Sept. 5, 2022, the Oregon Department of Transportation announced Feb. 22.

Drivers will need to show their permits at one of three checkpoints set up between Crown Point and Ainsworth State Park. Those cycling along the highway, taking public transportation or on a tour, will not need a permit. Other parking fees will still apply at recreation areas along the corridor.

Details, including how much the permits will cost and how many will be sold, are still being worked out, department spokesperson Don Hamilton said. People will be able to buy permits online in advance, though a limited number of same-day permits will also be made available.

The new permits are an effort to curb crowds along the scenic highway, which gives access to famous landmarks like the Vista House, popular hikes at Angel's Rest and Wahkeena Falls, as well as viewpoints at several other waterfalls, including Latourell Falls, Bridal Veil Falls and Horsetail Falls.

"This is a modest step to help address an increasingly serious problem," Hamilton said. "Everybody knows how bad the congestion has been getting in the gorge, especially in the waterfall corridor."

The area is known to fill with cars on sunny weekends in spring and summer, and people have been known to leave their vehicles parked precariously on the side of the highway when parking lots get full. In recent years, local sheriff's offices have begun towing cars parked illegally around scenic areas, especially in the Columbia Gorge and on Mount Hood.



Bend Bulletin, File

Visiting Multnomah Falls, Oregon's tallest waterfall, by vehicle could require obtaining a new permit. The Oregon Department of Transportation last week announced a new timed-entry permit system along the "waterfall corridor" of the Columbia River Gorge highway.

In the Columbia Gorge, where land is managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and Washington State Parks, as well as some local parks departments, officials have been gradually taking new measures to curb overcrowding and illegal parking.

In 2018, the U.S. Forest Service started requiring permits at Dog Mountain, a popular hiking spot on the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge, after limiting space in the parking lot and cracking down on illegal parking on the side of Washington state Highway 14.

In 2020, the Forest Service began a permitting system to visit Multnomah Falls during the busy summer season, offering 500 tickets for each one-hour time slot between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m.

Permits are typically waived for those who take public or private mass transportation to the Columbia Gorge, and services have

increased as agencies have introduced new permitting systems. The Sasquatch Shuttle is one option for the waterfall corridor along the historic highway, while the Columbia River Express runs along Interstate 84 between Portland and Hood River, stopping off at Multnomah Falls. The Dog Mountain Shuttle takes hikers to the trailhead from downtown Stevenson.

While the new system may rattle some people who are used to driving freely along the Historic Columbia River Highway, the Oregon Department of Transportation said the permits will ultimately create a more enjoyable experience.

"This is Oregon's crown jewel, the gorge, and we've got to make sure that we can provide access and we can provide a way to keep it a good and effective and safe experience for people," Hamilton said. "I think people are going to find a better and smoother experience in the gorge when we get this going."

Lawmakers pass bill banning sale of exotic animals for consumption

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon's regulatory system for importing livestock won't be affected by a recently approved bill intended to thwart diseases that pass from animals to humans.

House Bill 4128, which was approved by the Senate on Feb. 21 after earlier passing the House, would ban the sale of exotic wildlife for human consumption, among other changes.

Washington and California also are strengthening rules against the introduction of zoonotic diseases, so Oregon must avoid becoming a point of entry on the West Coast, said Rep. Ken Helm, D-Beaverton, chair of the House Agriculture, Land Use and Water Committee.

"This is a bill that tries

to get ahead of a potential problem," he said.

The current coronavirus pandemic sprang from such human contact with wildlife, but many past disease outbreaks have also been zoonotic in origin, Helm said.

However, the requirements included in HB 4128 don't implicate conventional livestock, which is regulated by the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

"We already have very adequate control over livestock," he said. "This bill expressly does not attempt to regulate those species of ODA's process, because it's just unnecessary."

The U.S. is one of the world's top wildlife importers, representing 20% of the global wildlife market, said Quinn Read, Oregon policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity nonprofit.

"This just creates an awful lot of opportunity for disease to spread from animals to humans," she said.

The bill is just one component of a broader strategy to prevent future zoonotic disease problems, Read said. "Oregon can't do it alone but the federal government and neighboring states can't do it without Oregon."

Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of government affairs for the Oregon Farm Bureau, said she appreciated that lawmakers ensured HB 4128 didn't have unintended consequences for the livestock industry.

"It has been narrowly crafted to avoid impacts to agricultural animal use, to fish and seafood and other markets we have in the state for farm-raised or wild-caught animals," Cooper said.

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