

Overtime:

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wages after a weekly threshold of 48 hours during most of the year and after 55 hours during a 15-week “peak labor period.”

“It is more generous to farmworkers than any other policy,” said Rep. Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles. “They won’t have their hours cut nearly as much and will still earn overtime wages after 40 hours.”

Holvey said he opposed the amendment because the state overtime payments wouldn’t include contributions to social security insurance, unemployment insurance or worker’s compensation insurance.

Farmworkers also would have to wait up to two months to receive the relief payments from the state government, he said.

The Joint Committee on Farm Worker Overtime thoroughly discussed and rejected the amend-



East Oregonian, File

River Point Farms workers plant onion seeds March 17, 2015, in a field near County Line Road west of Hermiston. The Oregon House on Tuesday, March 1, 2022, voted 37-23 to end the state’s agricultural exemption from higher overtime wages.

ment, Holvey said. “Sending the bill back to committee would not end up with a different outcome.”

Under the version of HB 4002 the House passed, the weekly threshold for farmworker overtime

would begin at 55 hours next year and incrementally drop to 40 hours in 2027.

Most farms will be divided into three tax credit tiers based on their number of employees:

- Growers employing fewer than 25 workers would qualify for tax credits of 90% of their added overtime payments next year, which would decrease to 60% in 2028, after which they’d expire.

- During that time, the tax credit rate would shift from 75% to 50% for growers with 25 to 50 employees, and from 60% to 15% for farmers with more than 50 workers.

- Dairies would be treated differently due to their round-the-clock need for animal care. Those with fewer than 25 workers would be eligible for a permanent tax credit rate of 100% of overtime payments, while those with more employees would qualify for a rate that incrementally shifts from 75% in 2023 to 50% in 2028, its final year.

Rep. Andrea Valderrama, D-Portland, said lawmakers heard from thousands of farmers and workers while deliberating the bill, but said she was most moved by the testimony of employees.

Farmworkers testified about enduring chemicals, dust and inju-

ries while not having enough money to cover their rent, education and healthcare needs, she said. “Why is it the people who do the most sacred work are the most oppressed, the most exploited?”

Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego, said the agricultural exemption was created more than 80 years ago at the national level to appease Southern lawmakers who wanted to maintain segregated conditions for Black farmworkers.

“It was not about economics back then, it was about race,” she said.

Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, said HB 4002 was not the bill he’d hoped for but it will be possible for lawmakers to tweak it as it’s implemented in future years.

“This bill is just the beginning of the conversation,” Evans said.

As lawmakers, it’s their obligation to recognize the equality of human labor and not to tolerate injustice, he said. “We are supposed to confront it, not sweep it under the rug.”

Fire:

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According to Kretschmer, more than 40,000 acres in Union County is not covered by the fire district.

“We’ve been looking at ways to let people know, because not everybody in the valley knows they don’t have fire protection,” he said. “This would be just another tool that could be used. Now, you never want to force anybody to do anything, right, so our goal is to let people know that hey, your house is not protected so there’s a good chance that you won’t have a fire department response.”

Kretschmer said dispatch in Union County can see whether or not a house is covered by the district, and whether they pay

into the essential fire service. In Umatilla County, it’s not as clear cut, according to Umatilla Fire District 1 Chief Scott Stanton. That leads to issues when some fire threatens homes and firefighters scramble to fight a fire, leaving little time to discern whether or not that fire is from a home that is covered.

“Imagine going to a fire scene,” Stanton said, “whether it’s here or Douglas County or wherever, and you go up to a subdivision and you know that there’s two homes maybe in there that have chosen not to pay the fire district. You may not know in an emergency situation which one is paying and which one isn’t, so you’re just going to do your work and then all of the sudden they find out they’re not paying.”

Stanton also said the discrepancy between who does and doesn’t

pay for fire services can create inequities.

“Under current Oregon laws and statutes a property can choose not to be in a rural fire protection district, but they can’t choose to not pay city or county taxes and they can’t choose not to pay school, education district taxes,” he said. “Yet, they can choose not to be in a fire district for that really vital, essential public safety service. They can choose not to pay.”

The option to not be in a fire district remains, but for rural homeowners that choose not to pay for fire services, hefty bills can accumulate in the event fire departments respond to a fire on a landowner’s property.

Enterprise Fire Department runs on a subscription-type service, according to Chief Paul Karvoski. That means property owners can

elect to buy in to the fire protection services even if they’re not in the district. Karvoski said the new law could simplify things if it passes.

“We do subscription contracts outside the city limits, so it would benefit us if we could just draw a circle and have a taxing area, like a district,” he said. “It would make it much simpler to respond and everything. It’d probably end up being cheaper for the public that’s out there in the rural part of the county that surrounds the city. Under these subscription deals we got, they pay \$145, and it says we’re gonna show up and then they get billed by the hour, per truck, and it gets very expensive for them. So introducing this in the legislation like this bill is gonna save more money.”

How much money? According to Karvoski, fire responses to structure fires can accrue rapidly due to bill-

able working hours spent fighting the fire and cleanup work.

“You get these house fires that we’re out there for six, seven hours — you’re pushing a \$5,000 bill pretty quickly,” he said.

The changes in how districts are laid out would bring rural areas more in line with municipalities, making fire services mandatory in the same way that taxes that support schools and county services are rolled into property taxes. Jerry Hampton, fire chief of Haines Fire Protection District, said it’s a matter of fairness.

“It is not fair for the taxpayers in the district to have to pay for the people that are not within the district boundaries that sometimes may need or require some type of fire suppression,” he said. “I have mixed emotions both ways. In all due respect, it’s probably the right thing.”