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THURSDAY, MAY 5, 2022

Founded October 16, 1875

A4

OUR VIEW

OT law will prompt changes in Oregon ag

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has signed legislation that will grant farmworkers overtime pay after 40 hours of work beginning in 2027.

Under the law, farmworkers will be owed time-and-a-half wages after 55 weekly hours of work in 2023, after 48 hours of work in 2025-26 and after 40 hours per week beginning in 2027.

The legislation changes a farm pay formula that has stood for 84 years, and will lead to big changes for both employers and employees.

The Fair Labor Standards Act, passed by Congress in 1938, established a federal minimum wage and provided for overtime pay for work beyond 40 hours. The act also provided 19 job classifications, including farmworkers, that are exempt from the overtime rule.

Critics argue the exemption was the product of racism and pandering to the needs of special interests — big, “corporate” farming concerns. Farmers of every scale note that farm work is distinct from factory production. The nature of most farm work makes it difficult to schedule in eight-hour days and 40-hour work weeks.

The economics of agriculture have not changed since 1938. Farmers still are price takers, not price makers, who cannot simply pass along higher labor costs to consumers the way retailers and manufacturers, though limited by the impacts of competition, do.

Gov. Brown acknowledged the bill she signed is not perfect. She points out the bill allows for a phase-in for overtime pay, a provision she says will give farm interests time to negotiate changes and improvements to the legislation.

No doubt farm interests will try to get the law changed. But, it seems unlikely there will be significant changes made. It is more likely that farmers and processors will use the grace period to find ways they can change their operations to reduce labor costs.

Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of government affairs at the Oregon Farm Bureau, said farm employees also will lose out when employers can't afford to hire more workers or must offer workers fewer hours.

“We think this legislation will have devastating consequences for our family farms and their employees, will likely result in significantly reduced farm employment in Oregon and is really going to change the landscape of Oregon agriculture,” Cooper said.

Innovators are busy designing machines that can do intricate and delicate work such as picking fruit and pruning trees. Higher labor costs will hasten that effort.

Farmers who produce labor-intensive crops also are weighing the profit potential of growing crops that require less labor. Those crops generally are not as valuable as the labor-intensive crops, but for smaller producers the potential reductions in costs could make those crops more viable.

Inevitably, some farmers will decide they can't afford higher labor costs, increased automation or changes in their cropping plans. They will sell out to a larger operation that can.

We think everyone performing farm work should be paid as much as business conditions allow. But we know that mandating overtime won't change the basic economics.



The changing climate and elk



BILL ANEY
THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

Climate change is real, and it is affecting our Blue Mountains. There are local signs of global climate change all around us. Hotter and earlier summers, lower snowpack that melts off earlier, more severe spring flooding and very low midsummer stream flows are becoming the new normal.

And don't get me started about the length and severity of our summer fire season.

Now we are starting to see scientific evidence of how these climate changes are affecting the plants and wildlife of the Blues. This research points out how significant, and how complicated, the effects of a warming climate are on those creatures that share the earth with us.

I recently heard a presentation that explained the effects of changing spring and summer weather patterns on our native bee species. Research at three sites in Northeastern Oregon found that unusually warm temperatures early in the summer have a dramatic negative impact on bumblebees, which evolved in cooler climates. These warmer early season temperatures also cause some flowering plants to bloom, die back and dry out earlier, providing less food for our bees during the peak of the summer.

We can't afford to try to live without

bees; 75% of our flowering plants rely on bees for pollination. Maybe you can live without wildflowers — but can you live without blueberries? Or apples or alfalfa?

OK, how about elk?

I heard another presentation this winter that summarized research on elk and climate change from the past 30 years at the Starkey Experimental Forest between La Grande and Ukiah. Research wildlife biologist Mike Wisdom shared that the average temperature at Starkey has increased about 2.5 degrees Fahrenheit since the early 1990s, accompanied by reduced snowpack and earlier melt. This means less soil moisture in the late summer and lower forage quality for calves and nursing cow elk through the summer.

Elk living in this warmer climate gain less fat in spring and early summer, have less body fat in fall and have calves that are born later and therefore smaller going into their first winter. As with the bees, the period of peak forage quality and quantity is coming out of sync with the time it is most needed by elk herds, and the elk may not be able to adjust easily.

Another recent and interesting piece of research into climate change and wildlife comes from the Midwest. This research evaluated songbird nesting dates from the past 143 years and found that for 24 species of birds the average date of nesting has advanced an average of 25 days. These birds are nesting more than three weeks earlier than they were prior to the widespread use of the

internal combustion engine.

The problem is when seasonal happenings that have been synchronized over time suddenly come undone. Eons of evolution have brought wild-life to time their life events with peak availability of quality food, water and shelter. Bees need plants to flower at the right time. Birds need insects to provide a source of protein during the nesting season. Elk need quality forage to meet the demands of nursing mothers and rapidly growing calves.

Nature doesn't use an appointment calendar, but there are a variety of environmental cues that synchronize seasons when they work right. Day length, temperature, rainfall, snowmelt; these are all cues that plants and animals use to time their lifecycles to maximize their chances of survival. When things fall out of sync, the system comes apart. Plants don't get pollinated, birds arrive on their nesting area before the local hatch of insects, elk calves don't get enough summer nutrition to survive the winter.

Global climate change isn't just happening in far-off places and is more than melting glaciers and polar ice caps or flooded low-lying Pacific Island villages. It is impacting our Blues in ways that we are just beginning to understand, and without significant changes in the ways we use fossil fuels the future is going to be very different for us and generations to follow.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.

YOUR VIEWS

Morrow County has a winner in Commissioner Lindsay

I am writing to offer a strong endorsement for Melissa Lindsay as a candidate for reelection to the Morrow County Board of Commissioners.

I first met Melissa during her 15-year tenure as a vice president and manager of the mortgage division of the Bank of Eastern Oregon, before she stepped down to become an integral part of a growing family farming operation.

Counties do many things, but a keen awareness of fiscal issues is vital in the management of county budgets. She brings a wealth of experience to the job and that has not gone unnoticed. She is now finishing a term as treasurer of the Association of Oregon Counties, having been selected by her peers. As president of that organization, I work closely with Commissioner Lindsay on a regular basis.

Umatilla and Morrow counties have forged a strong partnership, and we work together often on matters of mutual interest. Commissioner Lindsay has been a strong supporter of that effort that has proven beneficial for both counties as a way of developing a stronger voice for our portion of Eastern Oregon. She is energetic, has roots deep in

DEADLINE FOR ELECTION LETTERS

The East Oregonian will institute a deadline for letters to the editor, so we can be fair with all the letters we receive and allow for responses before Election Day, if necessary. We run local letters of endorsement on a first-come, first-served basis. Please submit your endorsement letters to the editor by 5 p.m. on Monday, May 9. You can email them to editor@eastoregonian.com, or mail them to East Oregonian, c/o Andrew Cutler, 211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton, OR 97801. We will publish our last letters on Saturday, May 14. Any letters received after the deadline will not run. Election Day is May 17.

Morrow County, and is a delight to work with. From my vantage point, Morrow County has a winner in commissioner Lindsay and the voters would be wise to return her to office.

**George Murdock, Umatilla County commissioner
Pendleton**

Susan Bower ready to represent, impact Umatilla County

I have known and worked with Susan Bower for the 16 years that she has lived in Umatilla County. We worked together on urban renewal projects and chamber of commerce projects.

Susan has a gift of identifying root causes of problems, developing a vision

and creating a plan. She then assists in implementation of the plan to make a difference. Susan has taken those experiences and a track record of community development to her personal businesses, Eastern Oregon Business Source, started in 2007.

She has focused on community development, training and grant writing that has benefited the entire county. She believes in smart economic development, through public private partnerships, to create jobs, fund infrastructure and generate tax base for Umatilla County.

Please join me in voting Susan Bower for county commissioner. She is ready to represent and impact our countywide issues.

**Jill Thorne
Pendleton**