

Oregon weighs direct on-farm food safety inspections

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

CORVALLIS — Oregon farm regulators may decide to take over fresh produce safety inspections from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration next year.

The FDA began performing inspections in Oregon in 2019 to implement the Food Safety Modernization Act, a federal statute intended to prevent foodborne illness.

Since then, the state Department of Agriculture has focused on providing education and technical assistance to fresh produce growers rather than directly conducting on-farm inspections.

However, some farmers have told ODA that they'd

prefer to be overseen by state inspectors who are more familiar with local crops, said Susanna Pearlstein, the agency's produce safety program manager.

"They want Oregon people to regulate Oregon agriculture," she said.

Currently, Oregon is one of just four states that allow FDA to perform on-farm inspections rather than hiring their own inspectors, she said May 5 at the State Board of Agriculture meeting in Corvallis.

"The majority of states have taken on regulatory programs," Pearlstein said.

Farmers are inspected by 25 investigators from FDA who may not be acquainted with the processes and equipment used for the state's



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press, File

Oregon farm regulators are weighing whether to conduct on-farm inspections of fresh produce or continue to have the U.S. Food and Drug Administration do it.

niche crops, she said.

Some of them may prefer working with ODA inspectors who are more knowledgeable about their specific circumstances, said Lauren Hender-

son, ODA's deputy director.

Those state inspectors would be credentialed by the FDA and operate under its authority.

The Oregon Farm Bureau

has urged the ODA to take on the additional inspection role, citing "significant regulatory hurdles for producers" who've found "federal inspectors to be overreaching and difficult to work with."

Support for switching to ODA inspectors is not universal among the state's farmers, though, and agency officials plan to seek more input before they have to make a decision.

"We want to have additional stakeholder outreach, meetings and conversations," said Alexis Taylor, the agency's director, noting ODA also will ask the State Board of Agriculture to weigh in on the choice.

"It's going to be an additional workload," she said.

The ODA is approved for \$630,000 in federal funds to

provide assistance and education during the FDA's 2021-2026 grant cycle. If it decides to directly perform inspections, the federal government may provide another \$500,000 in funding.

The state agency must decide by a March 2023 deadline to qualify for that funding during the current five-year grant cycle.

While it's estimated those funds would cover the ODA's costs of implementing the program, it's unknown whether the agency can count on continued federal support in future cycles, said Henderson.

The FDA reduced its education and outreach funding by \$100,000 in 2021-26 compared to the previous grant cycle, for example.

'We need every state to step up'

U.S. health secretary in Oregon speaks on mental health

By PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

PORTLAND — Xavier Becerra said the federal government will be there to support mental health services — starting with the new national 988 hotline for suicide prevention — if states also step up.

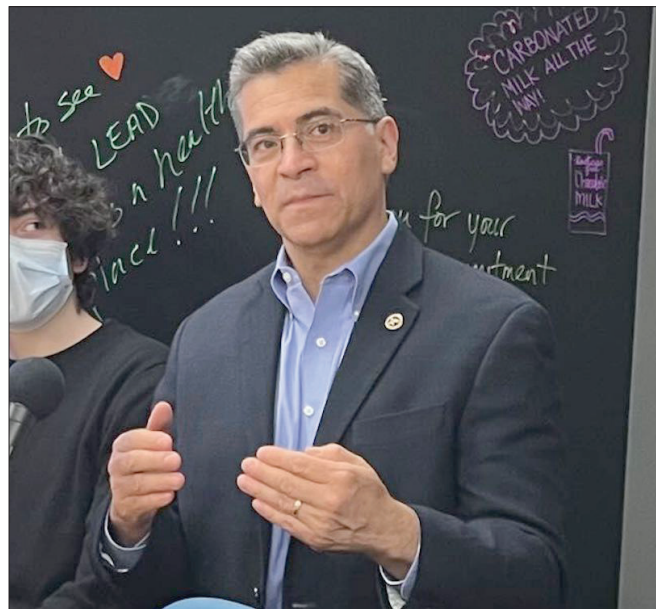
Becerra, the U.S. secretary of health and human services, made his comment Thursday, May 5, after he and Gov. Kate Brown spoke with six young workers for YouthLine, a peer-to-peer service that is part of the Lines for Life nonprofit based in Portland.

On his brief stop in Oregon, Becerra also took part in a roundtable discussion with three of Oregon's U.S. representatives, state legislators and mental health advocates, and met privately with Planned Parenthood advocates. He also visited the Sylvania campus of Portland Community College, where he met future health care workers and took part in another roundtable.

The HHS budget for 2023 now before Congress proposes \$700 million for implementation of the 988 hotline, which is scheduled to start July 16 — the amount is up from the \$109 million in the current budget — and a total of \$7.5 billion for competitive grants to states to transform their mental health services. The larger amount is part of a 10-year, \$51.7 billion commitment that President Joe Biden laid out for mental health in his first State of the Union address on March 1.

"We want to invest with those states that want to do the work. Gov. Brown has made it very clear that Oregon is going to step up and do that," Becerra told reporters after he and Brown met with the YouthLine workers.

"That \$700 million-plus



Peter Wong/Oregon Capital Bureau

Xavier Becerra, U.S. secretary of health and human services, responds to a question following a meeting with six young workers for YouthLine, a service of the crisis intervention service Lines for Life based in Portland. On his visit Thursday, May 5, 2022, Becerra also stopped at Portland Community College/Sylvania to meet future health care/mental health workers in training.

would make sure that these wonderful counselors who receive all those calls will be able to do those. We want to make sure that if someone does try to call, they actually get a person — not a busy signal, or be put on hold. When we launch 988 on July 16, it's going to be important that we have a whole bunch of folks who are ready to go. We need every state to step up."

Asked what he learned from the young workers, Becerra said:

"Probably that we've got peers who are doing a great job helping these youths, who are probably the shyest and least likely to come forward quickly. That has got to give you some sense of promise that this will be done well, so long as we invest and provide them with the resources they need."

Becerra said afterward of YouthLine: "I hope we can plant seeds of money for programs like this that make more peer-to-peer support possible. I think if we had more young people at our front line to help youths undergoing mental stress, we'd catch them a lot faster."

Brown said it was not her first visit to Lines for Life,

which specializes in crisis intervention and treatment for addiction.

"But to hear from the young people doing the work is extraordinary," she said. "It makes me hopeful for the future and committed to fight for President Biden's \$50 billion investment in behavioral health services across this country."

Brown signed a \$470 million commitment by the 2021 Legislature with a mix of state and federal dollars to boost capacity for mental health, reorganize services and expand and diversify the workforce.

According to a 2020 national survey, the share of adults who reported a mental health issue rose from 18.3% in 2016 — the rate had been stable for years — to 21% in 2020. The increase was attributed to a surge by young adults ages 18 to 25.

In a 2019 survey of high school students preceding the coronavirus pandemic, one of every three students reported persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness — and one in five reported seriously considering suicide.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month.

7 highways to get charging stations

By ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronicle

SALEM — An electric vehicle charging station could soon exist every 50 miles on some of Oregon's main highways.

The Oregon Department of Transportation announced Friday, May 6, it would direct \$100 million during the next five years to growing a network of charging stations for cars, trucks and SUVs. Some will charge even medium-duty vehicles such as delivery vans. Electric vehicles built before 2016 have an average range of 100 miles on a single charge and today get an average of about 250 miles, according to the Plug-in Hybrid & Electric Vehicle Research Center at the University of California, Davis.

The state transportation department itself won't be in charge of installing or operating the stations but will contract with private companies to build them,

according to a press release.

The money comes from a mix of federal and state funds, but the bulk of it comes from the 2021 federal infrastructure bill.

Of the \$100 million, about two-thirds will go to building charging stations every 50 miles on seven major corridors. Those include Interstates 5, 84 and 82 and U.S. Highways 26, 101, 20 and 97. Each charging station will have at least four ports and be built so more can be added over time.

There aren't yet estimates for how stations will be built because costs vary depending on the type of charger and where they are installed, according to Matt Noble, a public affairs specialist at the state transportation department.

"We're confident that this \$100 million investment will be able to build a backbone network every 50 miles across the seven corridors," he wrote in an email.

About \$36 million will go to building out charging

infrastructure in rural areas and cities, especially at apartment complexes. Noble said the department will meet with stakeholder groups during the next two years to figure out what needs are and where the stations would be best located in rural and urban areas.

The state transportation department set a goal in 2021 of tripling the number of electric vehicles in Oregon by the end of 2023 and of expanding the statewide electric vehicle charging network in the state 10% by 2025. There are about 2,100 electric vehicle charging stations in Oregon, according to the Oregon Department of Energy.

Oregon Department of Transportation will be going after billions of dollars in federal grants for additional charging infrastructure that will work for heavy-duty electric vehicles, such as commercial trucks and buses, according to the department's press release.

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