

Lawmakers drop farm property tax bill

By Mateusz Perkowski
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Intense opposition by Oregon's farmers, ranchers and forestland owners has apparently convinced lawmakers to back away from altering key property tax provisions affecting agriculture and forestry.

Machinery used for agriculture and forestry is exempt from property tax assessments while property dedicated to producing crops, livestock and timber is less heavily taxed than other real estate.

Under the original language of House Bill 2859, the property tax exemption for equipment and the farm use assessment for land would expire in 2024 unless renewed by lawmakers.

The proposal evoked alarm in Oregon's natural resource community, which turned out in full force at a

March 1 hearing to argue that creating a "sunset" for these provisions would financially destabilize farming, ranching and forestry.

By the end of the hearing, the overwhelmingly negative testimony against HB 2859 seemed to have the desired effect on members of the House Revenue Committee.

"I'm pretty convinced putting a sunset on these things that are very long-term assets doesn't make any sense," said Rep. Phil Barnhart, D-Eugene, the committee's chair.

At the beginning of the hearing, Barnhart said the bill was drafted in response to an audit from Oregon's Secretary of State's Office, which called for periodic review of existing property tax exemptions and tax credits.

In light of the objections to HB 2859, though, Barnhart said he thought the sunset provisions related to natural resources should be elimi-

nated from the bill.

The suggestion drew no objections from other committee members, so Barnhart said they would only consider the remaining provisions of HB 2859 related to economic development and other issues.

"I think you should consider all of what I just said means that you win," Barnhart told the audience, to enthusiastic applause.

Farmers, ranchers and forestland owners at the hearing emphasized that natural resource industries were already highly uncertain due to the weather and volatile markets.

Landowners said they shouldn't also have to contend with the possibility their property taxes may rise dramatically every six years, which is the period of sunset review established under HB 2859.

"In the orchard business, we need to plan long term," said Bruce Chapin, a hazelnut producer near Keizer,

Ore.

Marsha Carr, a forestland owner near Monroe, Ore., said her annual property taxes would rise from about \$1,000 to more than \$25,000 under HB 2859.

Carr said her family harvests timber in small patches of five to seven acres, which preserves habitat for wildlife and songbirds.

"That would have to change to pay the taxes," she said. "We would have to cut larger areas."

Farmers rely on specialized equipment but they often operate it for only a month or less per year, unlike other industries where machinery creates revenues year-round, said Roger Beyer, a lobbyist for the Western Equipment Dealers Association and several crop organizations.

If property taxes were imposed on farm machinery, it would destroy demand for machinery, he said. "It

would simply dry up and go away."

Landowners also testified that property would unfairly be taxed at the maximum assessed value if the farm use assessment was allowed to expire.

Oregon's land use system would still prevent landowners in farm zones from building homes or other high-value structures on their property, even if it was taxed as if such construction was possible, opponents said.

Mark Simmons, a rancher from Elgin, Ore., said the farm use assessment is part of a "grand bargain" between land use restrictions and property taxes.

While it's currently tough to raise cattle on Simmons' property, it could be a "gold mine" for development, he said.

"It's mostly rocks and cheat-grass," he said. "Some of those rocky hills with cheat grass have a view."

BULLIES

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A mostly subdued audience left the building after the film. Jadon Garland called the event a success in getting out the word about bullying.

"We had a good crowd; it was exactly what we wanted. It was very inspiring; I hope it made an impact."

"We had some teaching staff here and students from all three schools, and that was great. I'm very pleased," said Tamarah Duncan, Family, Career and Community Leaders of America adviser.

Julie Garland appreciated both the teen and adult turnout. She also mentioned possible follow-up with the "Natural Helpers" group at the county's schools, composed of teens selected by their peers as safe to air out their problems. "The goal of that program is that by strengthening that program, you're strengthening the overall school environment."

"We don't have a problem?"

It's unpleasant to think that



Steve Tool/Chieftain

Enterprise High School freshman Jadon Garland addresses a crowd of more than 200 who attended the showing of the film "Bully" at the OK Theatre on Feb. 23. The film graphically addressed how the effects of bullying on children, parents and communities. Garland brought the film to the theatre as part of his Family, Career and Community Leaders of America project.

Wallowa County Schools harbor bullies. But the 2016 Oregon Student Wellness Survey indicates that is the case.

That survey indicated that eighth grade bullying here is above statewide norms. In

particular, taunts berating children for their physical characteristics or clothing far exceeded state levels. Taunts over alleged sexual preferences are high on the list as well. Although the statistics show

many of these problems are resolved by the 11th grade, the survey shows higher than average rates of fistfights on school property as well as occasions of students being threatened with a weapon on school grounds.

However, Building Healthy Families Youth Prevention Coordinator Jason Wilcox cautioned that the survey results are possibly misleading because it is the first time the county's schools have taken the survey in a number of years. Jason Wilcox said the 2016 survey would establish a baseline and subsequent surveys would determine if the 2016 results are an anomaly.

Bringing it all back home

"Tom," a student at the Building Healthy Families' Alternative Education School is a local victim of bullying as well as suffering from severe depression. He first saw the movie about two years ago, and it made an impression on him.

So he can speak candidly about a personal matter in a small community, Tom's identity is being obscured by the Chieftain.

"I know it's cliché, but I

thought, 'Wow, I'm not the only one. I'm not the only person this is happening to. But I also felt pretty bad about myself.'"

Tom transferred from one of the county's schools to another after the sixth grade because of unaddressed bullying issues. "The first school is when my depression started happening. I started getting uncomfortable around myself and others and feeling very suicidal," Tom said.

After the parents of a concerned friend called the school, Tom started seeing a counselor to ease his troubles. Although the counselor worked out a coping plan for Tom, he stopped attending after an outburst. He subsequently transferred to another junior high in the county.

Tom started at the new school with optimism, thinking he could turn over a new leaf. He hadn't accounted for rumors and the proximity of the county's schools.

"Rumors spread like wildfire: 'Don't talk to him; he's a psychopath, a murderer.' All I said was: I wanted them to leave me alone forever. They took that as a death threat," Tom said.

He tried melting into the

background with limited success.

"The popular kids started targeting me. They know I'm depressed and suffer from social anxiety. They made it worse just for the fun of it, for the laughs," he said. Complaints to school staff led to intensified bullying, escalating from general taunting to Tom being punched, shoved into lockers and even pushed down a staircase.

Tom said that even complaints to the school principal led nowhere. At the end of the school year he was transferred to the Alt Ed school. He worried about the new school after his previous experiences but received reassurances from BHF executive director and Alt Ed instructor Maria Weer that he would fit in. "Maria gave me confidence, which I really needed," he said. Enrolled at the school for several years now, Tom is in a comfortable place. "I have a lot of friends here. It's really nice."

This, his second viewing of the film brought an amount of satisfaction. "I felt like I'd crossed over a milestone. I'm still here, I'm still breathing. I'm still making people smile," Tom said.

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