

Local & State

Legislators revamping carbon emissions bill

■ Revised version of controversial bill intended to reduce effects on rural areas

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The environmental plan that launched a thousand logging trucks is getting a makeover in the Oregon Senate.

Private negotiations among state senators have led to a new legislative concept. It's the skeleton of what could be a new system to gradually clamp down on greenhouse gas emissions from Oregon companies.

The Senate president's office has been soliciting feedback from interest groups in recent days. The Oregon Capital Bureau obtained the concept, dated Dec. 11.

A previous effort to control emissions and impose significant fees collapsed in the 2019 Legislature.

That proposal, which set up a market system to encourage businesses to reduce their carbon emissions and would have connected Oregon to cap and trade systems in Canada and California, passed in the House.

But it prompted ire from Senate Republicans, who eventually fled the Capitol to prevent a vote on the bill. They maintained the proposal would hurt their largely rural districts.

House Bill 2020 also sparked a protest from timber companies and logging truck drivers, who spent a day in June encircling the Capitol, blowing horns to exhibit their discontent. The timber industry would have been exempt from regulation under the plan, however.

But Democrats are adamant they'll get a policy through next year to address the growing threat of climate change.

Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, a leading advocate for a climate policy, stressed on Friday that the concept is "extremely preliminary," and that he hopes another, updated version will become public in about a week.

"It's very much a work in progress," Dembrow said.

The new proposal creates a staggered system to reduce carbon emissions. It provides most polluters with emissions allowances. The allowances would scale back over a matter of years.

The allowances can be traded among those businesses covered by the policy so that firms who don't use all their allowances could sell the excess to those that don't have enough.

Unlike the earlier proposal, Oregon would be flying solo, rather than connecting to cap and trade programs in other places.



Claire Withycombe / Oregon Capital Bureau file photo

Log truck drivers rallied at the Oregon State Capitol in June to protest House Bill 2020, which would implement a carbon cap-and-trade program.

"I think it really does address a lot of the concerns that we heard that the bill would put inordinate costs on our rural residents."

— State Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland

"The limit, broadly speaking, is on our state emissions, and it's got to come down each year gradually in order to get to where we need to be in the future," Dembrow said. "And industries or sectors that can't be below that amount will have to purchase allowances to continue to emit above that amount."

The earlier proposal would have created a new state bureaucracy to manage the program. The current concept, instead, puts the oversight role under the Department of Environmental Quality, Dembrow said.

It also takes a different approach to a major point of contention last year: its impact on prices at the gas pump. Republicans argued rural Oregonians would feel the effects of a carbon policy more acutely because of the longer distances they must drive to get to work, school and to other duties of everyday life. Fuel suppliers would have faced added costs under the original proposal that would have been passed on to consumers.

The new proposal would instead mean that companies importing gas into the state would only adhere to the emissions system in the Portland area at first, starting in 2022, and then, three years later, metro areas with populations of 30,000 or more.

"That's a big change," Dembrow said.

While the details aren't "quite there yet," he added, it's generally an idea he supports.

"I think it really does ad-

dress a lot of the concerns that we heard that the bill would put inordinate costs on our rural residents," Dembrow said, "So delaying the implementation for the most rural parts of the state is an acknowledgement that we're trying to address those concerns."

Dembrow said the current concept doesn't include what he feels are important aspects of last year's proposal, such as worker retraining for those who could be impacted by economic changes wrought by a new climate policy.

The Oregon AFL-CIO, a federation of unions representing about 300,000 Oregon workers, issued a rejoinder to the draft on Friday.

Graham Trainer, Oregon AFL-CIO president, said the current draft doesn't help workers whose industries could be affected by a climate policy and doesn't direct proceeds from the policy to creating "family wage, quality jobs."

"We have always believed that workers must be at the center of policy when debating how their work could be impacted, and especially in a cap and invest program that has the potential to produce major shifts in Oregon's economy," Trainor said in a written statement Friday.

"Any climate action that leaves behind workers and communities disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change is a policy and a process that should be rejected," Trainor said.

Sen. Fred Girod, R-Stayton, considered to be a point per-

son for Senate Republicans as they negotiate a new climate policy, couldn't be reached for comment Friday afternoon.

Sen. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, who is resigning to run for Congress in early January, has taken a step back from his previously front-and-center role in carbon policy for Republicans, and said when reached Friday that he hadn't seen the latest proposal.

Senate Republican Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr., of Grants Pass, said he hasn't been involved in the discussions over the policy, and said he hadn't gotten very far into reading the 60-page proposal Friday.

But he said that it was "madness" to consider sweeping climate legislation during the five-week legislative session. The session starts Feb. 3.

"We think that trying to run these huge policies that'll affect every Oregonian in five weeks is madness," Baertschiger said.

Brad Reed, a spokesman for Renew Oregon, a coalition of businesses and nonprofits pushing for state policy to address climate change, emphasized the concept is an early "starting point."

But Reed said the concept is missing "key components" that the group pushed for last session, and doesn't go far enough to make all major polluters pay or invest in moving the state to a clean energy economy.

"I want to stress that we consider this as where they will start negotiating," Reed said. "This is not a piece of legislation that the Renew Oregon coalition would be able to support."

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Catholic church removes Heppner priest due to sex abuse allegations from Oklahoma

EO Media Group

REDMOND — The Redmond-based Catholic Diocese of Baker removed an Eastern Oregon priest from his parish and suspended him from ministry after the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City reported the priest was subject of a substantiated allegation of sexual abuse of a minor.

The archdiocese said in a news release that Father Papa-Rao Pasala admitted to "inappropriate though not-yet criminal advances" with a 17-year-old in 2001 when he was temporarily assigned to a church in Edmond, Oklahoma.

The archdiocese said it notified the Diocese of Baker, where Pasala was serving as pastor. The diocese removed him from the ministry on Dec. 6. Pasala had been serving as the pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Heppner and St. William Mission in Ione since 2014, according to the Rev. Richard Fischer, vicar general of the Diocese of Baker.

Pasala will no longer be allowed to minister in the United States, according to a news release from the Diocese of Baker. No accusations were made against Pasala during his time in the diocese, Fischer said. Parishioners who have information about such allegations should call Leah Bickett, the diocese's Protection of Children coordinator, at 541-388-4004.

Oklahoma City archdiocese spokeswoman Diane Clay said Pasala has returned to his native India for disciplinary action by the Diocese of Nellore and had no way of contacting him for comment.

In a report released in October, the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City said allegations of child sexual abuse had been substantiated against 11 of its clerics from 1960 to 2018.

The archdiocese said the allegation against Pasala was not substantiated during the previous investigation. The archdiocese's list of those with substantiated sex abuse allegations says Pasala served at St. Monica Catholic Church in Edmond.

— The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Brothers admit bitcoin scam

PORTLAND (AP) — Two Canadian brothers pleaded guilty Monday to duping an Oregonian woman out of over \$140,000 worth of bitcoin currency.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports Jagroop Singh Khatkar surrendered to federal authorities for the negotiated plea agreement and appeared with his brother, Karanjit Singh Khatkhar, before U.S. District Judge Michael H. Simon in federal court in Portland.

The brothers, of Surrey, British Columbia, each pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit wire fraud and money laundering.

Under the plea agreement, the government will recommend each serve two years in prison.

FBI agents arrested Karanjit Khatkar July 18 at in Las Vegas after he arrived there from Canada. The older brother didn't turn himself in until Monday.

The two brothers stole about 23 bitcoin, worth about \$140,000 at the time and over \$160,000 today, from a Gresham woman after they created a fake Twitter account to impersonate the Hong Kong-based HitBTC bitcoin exchange.

They tricked the woman into contacting the Twitter account for support and got her to provide her email address, which they used to take over her account at the bitcoin exchange, according to prosecutors.

With access to her account, Karanjit Khatkar confirmed transfers of the woman's bitcoin to his bitcoin exchange account. Then, he shared the proceeds with his brother.

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