

Taking the fight to fire

Oregon Senate bill would expand cropland firefighting options

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — Cropland owners in Oregon would be eligible to join rangeland fire protection associations under a bill that seeks to improve their access to equipment and training.

Areas that produce dryland wheat are prone to wildfire — as evidenced by the devastating Substation Fire in 2018, which burned 78,000 acres in Wasco and Sherman counties — but currently cannot be included in RFPAs.

“During harvest time, ripe grain crops are a tinder box. A lightning strike, a spark of any kind, or chaff falling on a hot engine can cause a crop fire,” said Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athens, during a recent legislative hearing.

Hansell has introduced legislation that would allow RFPAs to be organized on “land used for cultivating crops” in addition to rangeland and undeveloped areas. Supporters say Senate Bill 590 will enhance firefighting resources in rural communities.

“Wildfire does not adhere to boundaries, it does not stop at fence lines or changes in land-ownership, or rangeland or cropland,” said Amanda Hoey, CEO of the Oregon Wheat Growers League.

By forming or joining an RFFA, farmers could better coordinate with state agencies on firefighting and acquire surplus firefighting equipment from the federal government, Hoey said.

“Though it may be surplus and at the end of its useful life in the eyes of particular agencies, small groups like RFPAs still can get a lot of use out of some of this equipment,” said Michael Kelly, a farmer and volunteer firefighter in Wasco County.

Perhaps more importantly, forming an RFFA would allow cropland owners to establish a closer relationship with the Oregon Department of Forestry and other professional firefighting organizations, he said.



East Oregonian/E.J. Harris, File

Farmers watch as 40-foot flames crest the top of a hill July 31, 2015, as they and area firefighters work to contain a wheat field fire northwest of Athena. State lawmakers are considering a bill that would allow cropland owners to join rangeland fire protection associations, which can acquire surplus federal equipment and access state training.

WHAT THE BILL WOULD DO

• Senate Bill 590 would allow rangeland protection associations, RFPAs, to fight fires on croplands. The bill is in the Senate Committee On Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery.

Currently, farmers who volunteer to fight fires are often seen as a liability, he said. “That makes communication and teamwork all but impossible during an actual fire.”

Farmers in RFPAs would receive training from the ODF, which would give them “legitimacy” among professional organizations, according to Kelly.

Aside from training, the agency can help RFPAs apply for grants, make legal filings and pay for liability insurance.

Kelly said farmers in his area have organized into a fire district, but the structure isn’t a good fit because they lack employees, tax revenue support or professional equipment. Vol-

unteer farmers fight fires with water tanks attached to pickup trucks and with tillage implements on their tractors.

“We are an RFFA, we just don’t reap any of the benefits,” he said.

Roger Beyer, a lobbyist for the Oregon Small Woodlands Association, said the financial impacts on the state’s Department of Forestry must be considered as part of the discussion about SB 590.

While the bill’s benefits outweigh any of these concerns, the legislation should provide added funding to ODF, Beyer said.

Without adequate funding, the heavier workload could detract from the agency’s

existing firefighting duties, he said.

The ODF has three full-time employees who support 23 RFPAs that cover about 15 million acres. In the past, the agency estimated that expanding RFPAs to include cropland would require an additional three employees at a cost of more than \$700,000 per biennium.

The Oregon Farm Bureau, which supports SB 590, is discussing the financial repercussions of the proposal with ODF and other stakeholders, said Samantha Bayer, the group’s policy counsel.

The legislation is important due to the agriculture industry’s frequent exposure to wildfires, she said. “In unprotected areas, farmers are the first responders and sometimes the only responders to wildfire in their remote communities.”

Ziping along the net in La Grande

Zipty Fiber’s new local network goes live March 4

The Observer

KIRKLAND, Wash — Zipty Fiber recently announced it completed a critical phase of the fiber-optic network build-out in La Grande that will deliver gig-speed fiber internet and an all-new, state-of-the-art network to area residents and businesses.

That network is set to go live beginning Thursday, March 4.

“Nearly 40% of the approximately 6,600 residential and business addresses within our service area will be ready for fiber service immediately and the remainder are scheduled for completion early this year,” the company stated in a press release.

The new network will put La Grande’s internet connectivity “on par with larger metropolitan areas throughout the nation,” according to Zipty Fiber, which means benefits such as no data cap and much faster internet uploading and downloading times.

“I am excited to know that last-mile fiber will be available to every residence in the city,” La Grande Mayor Steve Clements said in the press release. “Not only will this infrastructure improve internet speeds for entertainment and personal use, but it will also provide current and future businesses the connectivity they need for a strong web presence and active e-commerce trade. Having fiber available to home and business also allows the city to promote work-at-home opportunities, tapping into the trend of professionals moving to smaller communities away from urban centers.”

The company is investing \$500 million and building an advanced fiber network to smaller towns and rural communities across the Northwest that have been under-

See, *Zipty*/Page 3B

Food groups try to save program

Groups strive to save one Trump program: Farmers to Families food boxes

By **SCOTT McFETRIDGE**
Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — As the Biden administration sets up shop, many policies initiated by its hard-right predecessor are being targeted for extinction. But agricultural groups and anti-hunger organizations are fighting to keep one they’ve come to depend on, which channels food that might otherwise be plowed under to people reeling under the coronavirus pandemic.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture began the Farmers to Families Food Box program last April after many people were shocked to see farmers destroy crops because restaurant and institutions abruptly cancelled orders due to the virus even as food banks were crushed by demand from people suddenly out of work.

The USDA hurriedly paid roughly \$3 billion to contractors who within weeks worked with food banks to begin handing out boxes filled with 20 pounds of produce to motorists who queued up in lines that would snake through stadium parking lots and down suburban streets. Photos of those lines became among the most emblematic images of the suffering inflicted by the virus.

“Hunger is always with us, but it was more apparent with those photos,” said Mark Herrick, a USDA spokesperson.

The food boxes proved well suited to quickly helping people



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press, File

Agricultural groups and anti-hunger organizations are supporting the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farmers to Families Food Box, which began under the Trump administration.

who were suddenly in need, compared to the much larger food stamp program, which has eligibility requirements and paperwork. Officials say it offers lessons for how to respond to significant disruptions in the future.

After getting the program started, the USDA under former President Donald Trump approved four more phases costing another \$3 billion. After the final round ends in April, the USDA will reassess the program.

If the USDA extends it, the program will be a rare example of the new administration retaining rather than dismantling a Trump initiative as Biden is seeking to do

on issues ranging from immigration to health care. Unlike some other programs, the food box initiative was widely praised from the start, despite early concerns about contractors ability to handle the job.

As the program continued through last summer, Trump capitalized on its popularity by having a letter with his signature inserted into boxes, prompting Democrats to charge that officials were using it to influence elections. Some also were wary of Trump daughter Ivanka’s involvement in the program.

See, *Food*/Page 3B



Chelcee Mansfield/Contributed Photo

Enterprise FFA Greenhand competitors are, from left, Sydney Hopkins, Zach Farr-Roberts, Talia Aase, Harlie Stein, Codi Cunningham, Alex Rowley, Emily Love, Tanner Kesecker, Jessica Journigan, Lily Royes, Brandon Charlton (back) Trey Stewart and Zander Flores.

Ag students mark FFA Week amid pandemic

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA COUNTY — FFA students in Wallowa County are celebrating National FFA Week this week by sharing the successes of their chapters and modifying their activities to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a press release.

A majority of the events during the Feb. 20-27 week have been forced to change during the past school year because of the pandemic. Those changes included how meetings are held, community service and career development events. Despite the changes, students in FFA — formerly known as Future Farmers of America — have found ways to live and thrive in school and in the FFA events, the release stated.

“We work to keep our students in their assigned cohorts, all students wear masks and we

keep our distance,” the release stated.

In the fall, FFA chapters held their soils competition, largely with the help of Stangel Bison Ranch providing a pit and Dave Yost for officiating. Also held were competitions in crops and weeds via Google Forms, rituals via Zoom and members participated in virtual workshops with the state FFA officers.

As winter approached, the students participated virtually in an agricultural sales competition and the FFA district hosted the annual career development events, with the Enterprise and Joseph chapters excelling.

Aside from competitions, another honor in FFA is to earn the highest award the state can bestow upon its members, the State FFA Degree. To receive this honor members must have earned or invested \$1,500 or

See, *FFA*/Page 3B