



Lamb Weston/Contributed Photo, File
Potatoes run on a conveyor belt at a Lamb Weston processing plant in 2019.

DEQ: Plant polluted groundwater with tons of excess nitrate

Lamb Weston's Hermiston plant receives second notice from state about contaminating groundwater

By ALEX BAUMHARDT
Oregon Capital Chronicle

HERMISTON — Lamb Weston's french fry production plant in Hermiston has been discharging too much nitrate-loaded water onto area farms, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The wastewater flowing from the plant has contaminated the groundwater, causing nitrate levels in some nearby wells to measure four to seven times the safe limit set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, according to DEQ.

The state agency on Thursday, March 31, warned the company that it faced enforcement action for contaminating the groundwater.

It was the second such notice issued to the company in recent months. In November, DEQ told the company it had been discharging too much tainted water on area farmland and faced enforcement action for that as well. The agency doesn't disclose such notices on its website or otherwise publicize the findings until an enforcement has been made.

The notices ask the company about what steps it intends to take to cure the violations. For the most recent notice, Lamb Weston has 45 days. The agency then will consider whether to require corrective action or fine the company, according to Laura Gleim, public affairs specialist at DEQ.

The Hermiston french fry plant is Lamb Weston's second largest plant in the Columbia River Basin. As of 2019, the plant had more than 500 employees who made nearly 750 million pounds of frozen potato products annually, according to Lamb Weston's website.

Company officials could not be immediately reached for comment.

The violations were discovered when the plant applied to renew its water discharge permit from DEQ. The permit allows the plant to recycle water used to wash and process potatoes, which come into the plant covered in soil and fertilizers. The facility distributes the wastewater to nearby farms as a source of nutrient-rich water for irrigation.

But Lamb Weston overapplied the water on farms 75 times between 2016 and 2020, according to compliance reports that DEQ reviewed. During that time, 189 tons of nitrate in excess of permitted levels were applied in an area already deemed a vulnerable groundwater management area.

Such areas receive extra resources and planning from DEQ and designated committees in the area to reduce groundwater contamination.

DEQ said in its notices that wells downslope from where Lamb Weston's nitrate-rich wastewater was applied had levels of nitrate between 36 and 79 parts per million. EPA limits for safe drinking water are no more than 10 parts per million.

Nitrate is difficult and expensive to remove from water, and for those who rely on wells for their drinking water, getting rid of nitrate requires filters that cost thousands of dollars.



J.W. Dippold/Contributed Photo
J.W. Dippold, left, of the Imbler FFA chapter, and Justin Sharp, of Fort Rock, compete to see who can stack boxes the fastest using lightsabers at the state FFA convention in March 2022. Sharp served as state FFA vice president and Dippold as state FFA treasurer in 2021-22.

Reflecting on a MEMORABLE YEAR

J.W. Dippold served as FFA state treasurer in 2021-22

By DICK MASON • The Observer

IMBLER — J.W. Dippold is thankful that six years ago, J.D. Cant, then his FFA adviser at Imbler High School, refused to take no for an answer.

Dippold believes that if not for Cant's insistence that he participate in a livestock judging competition in Corvallis in 2016, he might never have become an FFA state officer and enjoy what he says was the experience of a lifetime.

See, FFA/Page B6



J.W. Dippold/Contributed Photo
J.W. Dippold, a member of the Imbler High School FFA chapter, speaks at the 2022 FFA state convention in Redmond. The senior served as the state treasurer and participated in the planning and execution of the convention, which was conducted March 17-21.

Audit remains behind schedule

Oregon's audit of jobless benefit delays is delayed, again

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon's latest audit of its troubled employment department won't be done until summer, several months behind the original schedule.

Secretary of State Shemia Fagan ordered the audit in February 2021, soon after taking office. She said the audit would explore why the Oregon Employment Department performed poorly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Auditors initially planned to wrap up their work last fall, then pushed back their timeline to spring. Now, they're targeting sometime in the third quarter of this year. Fagan's office said the review is underway and attributed the delay to auditors' efforts to be thorough and meet government auditing standards.

Oregon's employment department was among the slowest in the nation in paying jobless benefits during the pandemic, according to an analysis by The Oregonian/OregonLive. Nearly 200,000 Oregonians joined the ranks of the unemployed in the spring of 2020 as the pandemic shut down much of the state's economy.

Tens of thousands of those laid-off Oregonians waited weeks or months for their benefits during the heart of the crisis.

And it took Oregon eight months — longer than any other state — to begin paying benefits for the first week after their

layoff. Newly unemployed workers are not typically eligible for benefits during that week, but Congress waived the usual waiting period nationwide in an attempt to ease the economic upheaval.

The state employment department relies on an obsolete computer system, built on technology from the 1990s, even though Oregon received more than \$80 million in federal money back in 2009 to pay for an upgrade.

The result was that the employment department needed to manually process tens of thousands of claims that flooded in when the pandemic hit. Automated mailings to laid-off workers were often confusing or flat-out wrong, and the department's phone lines were jammed for more than a year as claimants called in to seek clarity or fix the state's mistakes.

Prior state audits, and a series of investigations by The Oregonian/OregonLive, found the employment department had been riddled with dysfunction in the decade leading up to the pandemic. The state fired three consecutive department directors amid a string of setbacks but failed to resolve some issues identified by state investigators and by the news organization.

The employment department's problems became a political flashpoint during the pandemic.

The audit's new timeline means it won't arrive before the May gubernatorial primary. Instead, the audit will land sometime during a hotly contested general election, 16 months after Fagan ordered the review.

"As auditors do their work they often find new information that can affect the timeliness of their work; it is important they are thorough and accurate and gather sufficient evidence. This is part of the auditing process and makes it tricky to predict when a report will be complete," said Ben Morris, spokesperson for the secretary of state.

The shifting dates aren't a postponement, he said, but a normal part of the auditing process.

"We understand the desire to get this information out to Oregonians, but part of following government auditing standards is the importance of crossing every 't' and dotting every 'i' before making our findings public," Morris said in an email.

Veteran employment department manager David Gerstenfeld has been running the agency on an acting basis since Gov. Kate Brown fired his predecessor in May 2020. The department has made several substantial reforms under Gerstenfeld, who set about methodically addressing the department's lapses and reducing mistakes.

Even so, delays and frustrations continued for more than a year after the pandemic hit. The employment department has chosen a vendor to replace its computers and says work is proceeding on schedule. But even so, Oregon doesn't expect to complete the upgrade until 2025.

Brown told The Oregonian/OregonLive a year ago that she would wait to make a decision about long-term leadership at the department, and other possible reforms, until the audit is complete.

The new timetable means that Brown's time in office will be nearly complete by the time auditors finish their work.



Fagan