



Yasser Marte/East Oregonian

The sun rises Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2022, as firefighters battle the flames on the west side of the Grain Craft flour mill in Pendleton.

Farmers, customers scramble to make new plans after flour mill fire

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

PENDLETON — Pacific Northwest wheat farmers are beginning to cope with the fallout from a massive fire Aug. 10 that left the Grain Craft flour mill in Pendleton a “total loss.”

The company is working with farmers to handle the excess supply, said Natalie Faulkner, director of communications for Grain Craft, based in Chattanooga, Tenn.

The building was more than 100 years old, Faulkner said. Twenty-two employees worked in the mill. There were no injuries in the fire. Pendleton Police Chief Chuck Byram said the mill was a “total loss.”

The company does not disclose the production capacity of the building, Faulkner said. The extent of the damage and possibility of rebuilding are not yet known, she added.

“It’s still an active situation, we are still evaluating everything, just trying to understand the cause and circumstances,” Faulkner told the Capital Press.

Ben Maney, president of Oregon Wheat Growers League, farms north of Pendleton.

He doesn’t take his grain

to the facility, but “a substantial amount of farmers” in the area do, he told the Capital Press.

“It’s been a staple for the Pendleton community for an awfully long time, generations, and it’s always been a central location (in town),” he said.

The fire is the latest hit for growers, after experiencing severe drought last year, Maney said. Many crops had rebounded this year with spring rains.

“A lot of farmers don’t have home storage, and they can’t store that grain on their farm,” he said. “For this heartbreaking event to happen today, it puts the community and a lot of the farmers in a tough situation. It hits the community hard.”

Jeremy Bunch, CEO of Shepherd’s Grain, a farmer-owned flour company, sent an email to customers about the fire.

“We are working on a contingency plan now and getting wheat staged for movement to another Grain Craft mill,” Bunch said. “Unfortunately, there will be an interruption in flour supply as we work through these details. We apologize for the inconvenience this causes. We are working hard to minimize this flour

supply interruption and will provide a timeline update very soon.”

The cause of the fire was “mechanical failure,” Byram, the police chief, told the Capital Press.

On Aug. 9, dispatchers received a report of black smoke coming from the mills, “with no visible flames,” according to a police department press release. The fire department responded, extinguished the small fire and remained on fire watch.

The fire subsequently reignited at about 4 a.m. Aug. 10 and became fully engulfed due to the dry grain and the wooden structure, Byram said.

Employees identified the source of the fire, Byram said.

“It happened in the mill itself, with one of the pieces of equipment, with a rubber bushing or housing that obviously got too hot and started the fire,” he said.

There were no injuries, he said.

It’s the middle of harvest, Byram said, so the mill was processing a lot of flour. He didn’t have an exact figure, but said Grain Craft employees estimated there were “hundreds of thousands of pounds of processed flour in the bins.”

There is no estimated cost of damage yet, he said.

“We can’t even get into the building, we can’t do anything right now, this is strictly defensive ... right now. They’re just trying to keep (the fire) away from other structures,” he said the afternoon of Aug. 10.

Some surrounding buildings have been damaged by water and smoke, Byram said.

The Pendleton Fire Department, Umatilla Tribal Fire Department, Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 and other agencies responded to the scene, at 501 S.E. Emigrant Ave.

The mill plays a “huge” role in the Pendleton community, Byram said.

“They’re a major employer; we are obviously an agricultural community that does a lot of dryland wheat farming,” he said. “Wheat farmers from the surrounding area bring their wheat in here to the Pendleton flour mill. It’s yet to be determined what the impact is, but I can gauge it’s going to be significant.”

Pendleton Assistant Fire Chief Tony Pierotti told the East Oregonian newspaper the silos were full of finished grain, so the fuel load was “extreme.”

What new tax, health care and climate bill means for the agriculture industry

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House on Friday, Aug. 12, passed a sweeping bill that will raise corporate taxes and spend hundreds of billions of dollars on climate and health care programs.

The package includes major provisions involving water and agriculture.

The House voted 220-207 along party lines. The measure had passed the Senate in similar fashion: 51-50 with Democrats in support, Republicans opposed and a tiebreaking vote cast by Vice President Kamala Harris.

President Joe Biden plans to sign the bill into law this week.

Democrats passed the bill using a process called reconciliation, which allows bills to advance with a simple majority rather than the 60 votes typically needed. Bills passed via reconciliation must be budget-related.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., called the legislation “historic” and “transformative.”

The bill’s main component is \$369 billion to be spent over 10 years on climate and energy programs.

The legislation also gives Medicare administrators the power to negotiate drug rates and extends expanded Affordable Care Act subsidies through 2025.

To fund the measures, the bill would set a 15% minimum tax on large corporations, create a 1% excise tax on companies’ stock buybacks and fund the Internal Revenue Service to audit more taxpayers.

According to numbers released by Senate Democrats, the measure would raise \$739 billion in revenue.

Supporters have dubbed the bill the Inflation Reduction Act, saying it will tackle inflation by lowering the deficit and costs for American families. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, however, said the bill’s effect on inflation will be “negligible.”

Republican lawmakers are concerned about the

bill’s increased taxation and spending.

In his speech on the floor ahead of the vote, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said that “passing this bill today means more expensive bills for Americans tomorrow.”

Farm groups took mixed stances on the bill. Some, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, raised concerns over tax increases, while others, including the National Milk Producers Federation, praised its approximately \$40 billion investment in USDA.

The bill includes \$3.1 billion in relief funds for “distressed” borrowers of USDA loans and \$2.2 billion in aid for farmers who have experienced discrimination from USDA.

The bill will pour \$20 billion into existing USDA conservation programs, including \$8.45 billion for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), \$6.75 billion for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), \$3.25 billion for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and \$1.4 billion of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

The package will spend about \$14 billion on rural clean energy programs, including \$9.7 billion to rural electric cooperatives for renewable energy projects, \$1.97 billion to the Rural Energy for American Program (REAP) and \$1 billion for Section 317 loans related to renewable energy.

The bill creates tax incentives aimed at channeling billions of dollars to wind, solar and battery development. It also includes subsidies for electric vehicles.

The package would direct \$500 million to bio-fuels infrastructure.

It also includes \$5 billion for fighting wildfires and boosting carbon sequestration.

Finally, it includes \$4 billion for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to improve drought resilience across the West.

Did looser liquor laws boost problem drinking?

By **ELAINE S. POVICH**
Stateline.org

SALEM — Oregon has joined nearly three dozen states that plan to extend pandemic-related liquor laws allowing curbside pickup or home delivery of alcohol to help restaurants, bars and liquor stores survive COVID-19 closures.

But some research shows that the states’ desire to boost the hospitality industry might be fueling binge drinking and higher overall alcohol consumption.

Of the 35 states (plus the District of Columbia) that loosened their cocktails to-go laws during the pandemic, 18 plus D.C. have made the rules permanent, and 14 have extended them, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States.

Many factors have prompted some people to drink more during the pandemic. Some drank to deal with their anxiety, stress or grief. Those working at home had easier access to alcohol and spent less time commuting in their cars. Many normal social interactions were canceled or curtailed.

But researchers say looser state liquor laws also contributed to a rise in binge drinking and overall consumption, with all the attendant health harms. A May 2020 study by researchers from the Johns Hopkins

Bloomberg School of Public Health found that people who had alcohol delivered reported consuming more drinks and drinking on more days than people who obtained it through other methods.

“With the increase in availability, we see excessive use,” said Alicia Sparks, chair of the non-profit U.S. Alcohol Policy Alliance, which lobbied against looser state laws. “There’s really strong science around increased availability leading to increased consumption and increased harm.”

‘Rethink the drink’

Oregon, which touts its wineries and breweries in state advertising, is one of the states where the debate between public health advocates and the hospitality industry ended with relaxed laws being made permanent. Democratic Gov. Kate Brown signed a measure last year that allows licensed establishments to sell “mixed drinks and single servings of wine in sealed containers for off-premises consumption.”

Mike Marshall, executive director of Oregon Recovers, a nonprofit that works to increase access to treatment and recovery programs to fight addiction, said the decision to ease access to alcohol is likely to exacerbate an already problematic situation in the state. According

to the Oregon State Medical Examiner’s office, alcohol-related deaths surged 73% from 2019 to 2020.

“Increased access leads to increased consumption, especially with binge drinkers and underage drinkers,” Marshall said in an interview. “In the face of increased harm and damage caused by alcohol, the Oregon Legislature and governor thought the best thing to do was to increase (paths) for alcohol consumption.”

However, Oregon officials recently launched a “Rethink the Drink” campaign to persuade state residents to take stock of how much alcohol they are consuming. Using public service announcements on various media platforms, the state is trying to educate Oregonians on how much alcohol is contained

in different kinds of drinks and how much it might take someone to become impaired.

Erica Heartquist, spokeswoman for the public health division of the Oregon Health Authority, said the program was not especially timed to coincide with the increased drinking during the pandemic, but the timing is fortuitous.

“Alcohol is the third-leading cause of death in Oregon,” she said. “We love our beer and our wine in the Pacific Northwest, so we want to put the brakes on excessive drinking.”

Harmful impacts

A study by RTI International of North Carolina found an overall increase in alcohol consumption that began with the onset

of the pandemic and continued throughout 2020. In terms of drinks per month, alcohol consumption was 39% higher in November 2020 than it was in February 2020, the month before the pandemic began, according to the study. Binge drinking increased by 30% during the same period. There were especially large increases in consumption during that time frame among Black and Hispanic women (173% and 148%, respectively) and Black men (173%).

Carolina Barbosa, a health economist at RTI, said to-go alcohol sales and expanded delivery services probably played a role in the increases. Barbosa said states are loosening the rules without regard to the data on increased alcohol consumption, which can lead

to numerous public health consequences such as alcoholism and liver disease.

“Yes, the problem is in many states (looser laws) are becoming permanent,” Barbosa said. “For sure, they should be rethought.”

But others question the connection between looser laws and increased consumption — or even that people drank more during the pandemic. The Distilled Spirits Council, a trade association, pointed to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, issued by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. In the most recent report, which covers 2020, only 15.4% of people 12 or older said they drank “a little more or much more” than they did before the pandemic.

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