

State to expand targets under Clean Fuels Program

BY GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon regulators are accelerating targets meant to shrink the carbon footprint of the state's transportation sector.

The governor-appointed Environmental Quality Commission voted unanimously in September to expand the Clean Fuels Program.

When the program was first implemented in 2016, it called for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from transportation fuels 10% below 2015 levels by 2025. The new targets are 20% below 2015 levels by 2030, and 37% by 2035.

To accomplish this, fuel distributors may choose to import more lower-carbon biofuels such as ethanol or renewable diesel — made from vegetable oil — to replace gasoline or diesel.

Alternatively, companies that produce biofuels or electric vehicles may generate credits that can be bought or sold to comply with the program.

Cory-Ann Wind, Clean Fuels Program manager for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, said increasing the emissions reductions targets will ensure the market remains strong for credits and investments in low-carbon transportation fuels.

"The policy is flexible. We leave it up to the industry to decide which fuels they want to invest in," Wind said. "It's all about the carbon score, and how much cleaner it is than the fossil fuels,



Don Jenkins/Capital Press File

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gas and diesel it displaces."

Transportation is the single largest carbon polluter in Oregon, making up 37% of the state's total emissions, according to DEQ.

Since 2016, DEQ figures show the Clean Fuels Program has helped reduce 7.3 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions and displaced nearly 1.5 billion gallons of fossil fuels.

About 60 companies are required to participate in the program, though Wind said the total number of regulated entities is closer to 225, which includes companies that voluntarily participate and generate credits in the marketplace.

For the month of September, credits were trading for \$114.74. Each credit represents 1 ton of greenhouse gas

emissions.

Reducing the emissions targets will further increase demand for the credits, Wind said, keeping prices stable and spurring incentives for companies to invest in cleaner fuels.

"Investors in clean fuels technology need the higher credit prices to be able to invest in expanding capacity for facilities, or to continue to reduce the car-

bon intensity of those fuels," Wind said. "On the climate side, too, the more aggressive those standards are, the more (emissions) you're reducing as well."

While agriculture is exempt from the program, Wind said the state is eyeing whether to approve credits for makers of small-scale electric tractors.

A project to test the potential of these tractors is underway in Oregon, led by the Wy'East Resource Conservation and Development Area Council, with support from Sustainable Northwest, Forth and the Bonneville Environmental Foundation.

"As all of these technologies evolve, we want to make sure they can benefit from the program and incentives," Wind said.

Despite the agricultural exemption written into the Clean Fuels Program, farmers and ranchers have expressed concern about how the initiative will affect fuel prices going forward.

Lauren Poor, government affairs director for the Oregon Farm Bureau, said the exemption is essentially meaningless, since producers buy fuel on the open market and are therefore subject to increased fuel costs regardless.

"In the broader scheme of things, the expanding targets ... will not make a meaningful difference in combating global climate change, but will have an immediate impact on Oregon's rural communities, driving up the cost of everyday necessities for Oregon farmers," Poor said.

Oregon set to collect contributions for paid leave benefits

BY PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon, after years of preparation, is set to start collecting contributions from businesses and employees for a new state program of paid family and medical leave.

Contributions are scheduled to start Jan. 1. Benefits are scheduled to be paid starting Sept. 3, 2023.

"We want to get the word out about this vital safety net for working people in Oregon," said Karen Madden Humelbaugh, director of Paid Leave Oregon for the Employment Department.

The initial contributions for 2023 are capped at 1% of wages. For employees, their share is six tenths, or 60%; for employers of 25 or more, their share is four tenths, or 40%. Smaller employers are not required to contribute, though

their employees will have to, and employees are covered.

Tribes, self-employed workers and independent contractors also can opt into the program.

Employers that already offer plans with equivalent benefits can be excused from the program. So far, 31 plans have been submitted, and the Employment Department has approved six. Humelbaugh said others are in the process, and the agency has set 30 days as the turnaround point for a decision.

Benefits under the Oregon program are set at a maximum of \$1,215 per week for 12 weeks during a single year. The contributions go into a trust fund for benefits, much like employer payroll taxes go into a trust fund for unemployment benefits.

According to the National Confer-

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ence of State Legislatures, Oregon is one of 11 states and Washington, D.C., with such programs. Oregon is among four states that have not yet started them. California and Washington already have done so.

Oregon approved a family-leave law in 1991, two years ahead of the federal law. But its requirement for 12 weeks of leave is unpaid.

Humelbaugh said that unlike definitions in other states, Oregon's program covers survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, harassment and

stalking. (Protections for them were added to the family-leave law starting in 2014.)

It also allows for medical leave for workers, care of a family member with a serious illness or injury, or the addition of a new child through birth, adoption or foster placement.

"It has one of the most inclusive definitions of family in the country," she said. "Family could be a neighbor, a friend or someone in our close circle."

Workers who choose to take leave for at least 90 days will have their jobs protected.

President Joe Biden proposed a paid leave program under federal law with an initial benefit of \$4,000 per month over 12 weeks, slightly less generous than Oregon's program. But Congress did not pass it. It is unclear

yet what happens to state programs if a federal benefit is authorized in the future.

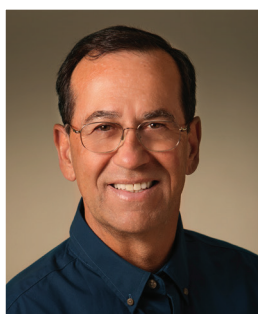
The Oregon Legislature extended the deadlines slightly in 2021 legislation.

Employers will use the Oregon Employment Department's new computer system, Frances Online, to file reports on employer and employee contributions to the paid leave fund. It is the same system that employers starting using on Sept. 6 to file payroll reports, the basis for the taxes that employers pay into the state unemployment benefits trust fund.

"That is part of the same portal. So we are ready for the contributions," Humelbaugh said. "We will be using that modernized system. Everything seems to be in line to meet that deadline."

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I pledge to:

- Work hard to to maximize fire and ambulance service throughout Baker County
- Continue to support local law enforcement agencies to reduce crime and hold offenders accountable for their actions
- Be a strong supporter for water issues and other matters facing our local agricultural producers
- Work to protect jobs at Ashgrove Cement and other mining entities
- Continue to work with all local entities (Chambers, Baker City Downtown, Interpretive Center, local Museums, Economic Development Committee, etc.) to provide resources to enhance our local tourism industry.
- Advocate and work with State and Federal agencies to provide affordable workforce housing in our community.
- Work hard to bring traded sector jobs to our County that provide family wage jobs for working families.
- Work with local entities to make sure that we have affordable day care for families with working parents

I am not beholden to any special interest groups and will bring honest and open communication to the County Commission. Please vote for Shane Alderson for Baker County Commission Chair.

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