

# H-2A burdens expected to rise

Farmers who use foreign guest workers face higher costs, more paperwork

BY MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

SALEM — Farmers who rely on foreign guest workers can only expect more red tape from upcoming revisions to the H-2A visa program, according to agricultural labor experts.

The stricter demands and increased costs may dissuade farmers from using H-2A or growing labor-intensive crops altogether — ultimately making the U.S. more dependent on food imports, experts say.

“We’re shipping our production off to our competi-

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tion,” said Michael Marsh, president and CEO of the National Council of Agricultural Employers. Marsh said his organization is worried enough to consider filing a lawsuit against the new regulations, which become effective in

mid-November.

“We’re very concerned what the outcomes are going to be from this regulation,” he said.

Proposed revisions that would have made the H-2A program more workable were not included in the final rule, though it did have provisions opposed by agricultural employers, said Kate Tynan, senior vice president of the Northwest Horticultural Council.

“We were fairly disappointed,” she said. “Most of the changes make the regulatory and financial burden worse on H-2A users.”

For example, the version proposed by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2019 would have provided a more flexible time frame for the arrival of guest workers, she said.

Instead of choosing a specific date, growers would set a two-week window for their arrival, Tynan said. The provision better reflected the vagaries of weather, but it was scrapped from the final version.

Similarly, the proposal would have allowed farmers to submit a single H-2A application for groups of workers who arrive at different times, she said.

This staggered entry provision was eliminated from the final regulation, so a separate time-consuming application is required for each group of workers, Tynan said.

Farmers must also continue to hire domestic workers until half the H-2A contract period is over, whether they’re needed or not, Tynan said. This period would have been shortened to 30 days under the proposal.

“You’re still required to hire whoever shows up in the middle of harvest,” she said.

The final rule also didn’t include a grace period that would give farmers two weeks to adjust their payroll systems to newly required wage rates.

Steep hikes in H-2A wages may instantly render a crop uneconomical to harvest, said Marsh of the National Council of Agricultural Employers.

“You get that kind of increase, you might be better off leaving the berries on the bush,” he said.

Though the final regulation approved by the Biden administration is onerous for farm employers, aspects of the Trump administration’s proposal were also troublesome, Marsh said.



Dick Mason/The Observer, File

Colleen McIntosh, owner of Peak Lifestyle Studio in downtown La Grande, gets ready to teach a fitness class on Tuesday, April 14, 2020. McIntosh said she’s always intended for the space to be more than just a studio, but a place to bring the La Grande community together.

# Reaching THE PEAK

Downtown La Grande studio introduces new Kona’s Corner coffee, protein shakes to fuel members

BY SHANNON GOLDEN • For The Observer

LA GRANDE — Peak Lifestyle Studio, with its fitness spaces, upstairs salon and massage therapy studio, has found another niche — one that aims to fuel its members as well as the community.

The downtown La Grande studio’s newest feature, Kona’s Corner, is a small cafe tucked into a corner that was once used for retail. Among the many available beverages include locally sourced coffee and a range of protein shakes and flavor options — and even vegan offerings.

“Protein is a really important macronutrient and really crucial for building muscle and helping the body recover after workouts,” owner and instructor Colleen McIntosh said. “That’s really what we want to introduce more people to.”

The studio — one of the newer mainstays on Adams Avenue — opened its doors in September 2019.

McIntosh said she’s always intended for the space to be more than just a studio, but a place to bring the La Grande community together.

“I knew that, yes, group fitness was going to be important, but that we’d have more to offer the women

in our community,” she said.

The newest addition to Peak’s offerings is not simply a place to recharge, it’s also a loving nod to the studio’s late four-legged mascot — Kona.

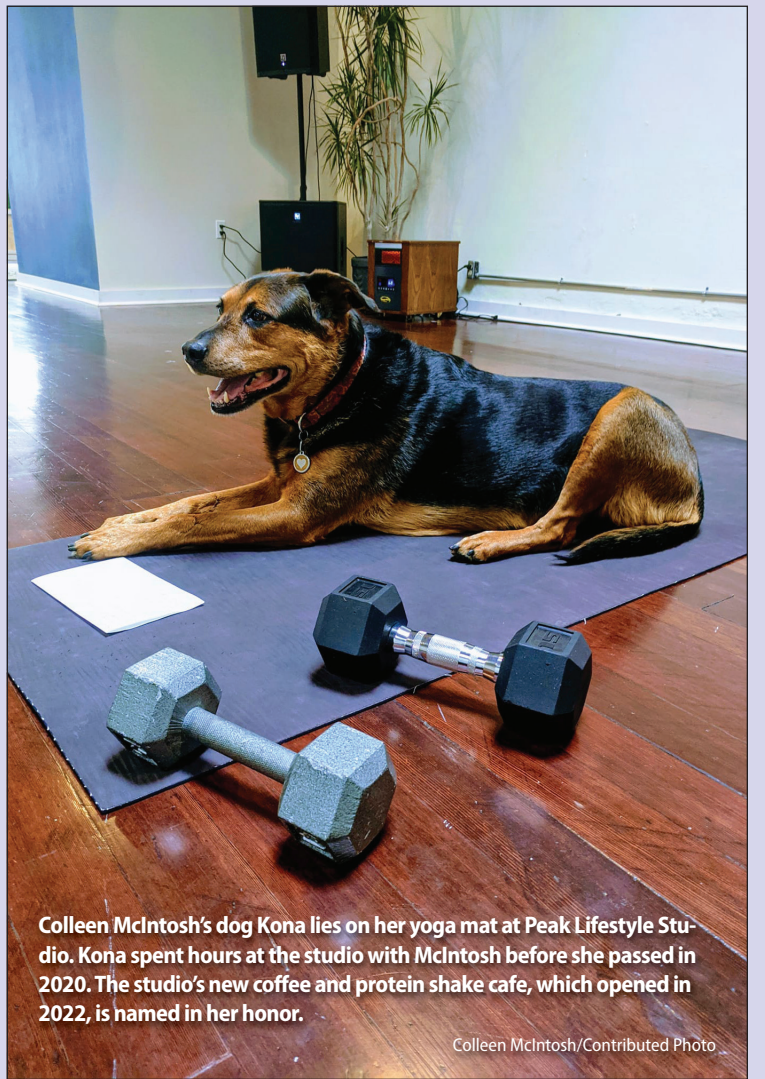
**A lifelong bond**

McIntosh was a veterinary technician for more than 12 years before opening Peak Lifestyle Studio. Her passion for animals extended into her own home, with her Rottweiler, Labrador retriever and German shepherd mix named Kona.

“She was my ride or die, she was there every step of the way, every joy, every hardship,” McIntosh said.

McIntosh said that as Peak Lifestyle Studio took shape, Kona was there throughout the process. Once construction was completed on the studio, Kona joined McIntosh at the studio every day, greeting members

See Peak / B6



Colleen McIntosh’s dog Kona lies on her yoga mat at Peak Lifestyle Studio. Kona spent hours at the studio with McIntosh before she passed in 2020. The studio’s new coffee and protein shake cafe, which opened in 2022, is named in her honor.

Colleen McIntosh/Contributed Photo

# Oregon’s poverty gap shrank during pandemic

BY MIKE ROGOWAY  
The Oregonian

SALEM — Even as COVID-19 upended Oregon’s economy and uprooted thousands of lives, the poverty gap between white and nonwhite Oregonians narrowed to the lowest point on record.

About 15% of Oregonians who didn’t identify as white were below the poverty line last fall, according to data published this fall by the U.S. Census Bureau. That’s just 3.6 percentage points higher than white Oregonians.

That gap was nearly four times greater a decade ago, in the aftermath of the Great Recession. And notably, the gap continued to close in 2020 and 2021 despite upheaval associated with the pandemic and the steepest, deepest economic downturn in Oregon history.

“The pandemic was an equal-opportunity disaster. And in a lot of ways our traditional disparities, they either didn’t widen or they got smaller,” said Josh Lehner, of the Oregon Office of Economic

Analysis, who wrote about the new census data.

Most striking is what happened to disparities in poverty rates over the past decade. The share of white Oregonians below the federal poverty line has remained relatively steady since the 1970s, typically ranging between 11% and 13%.

For nonwhite Oregonians, though, the share below the poverty line was consistently above 20% for decades, hitting a peak of 27.1% in 2011. That reflects historic inequities that have plagued the state for generations.

The poverty rate for nonwhite Oregonians began a historic decline as the Great Recession faded, though, dropping below 20% in 2017 and continuing to fall.

“It was all about the economy and the rising labor market,” Lehner said. Unemployment fell to a historic low and wages rose. That benefitted all groups, but especially those who had been living on the margins.

“If you’re anywhere near the poverty line, you’re really struggling to put food on the table and paying rent,” Lehner said.

The federal poverty line, set nationally without accounting for higher cost of living in states like Oregon, changes annually. For 2022, it was annual income of \$13,590 for a single person, or \$27,750 for a family of four. That represents extreme poverty. Many people above that line are barely getting by.

“If you’re just technically a few thousand dollars above the poverty line it’s not like you’re living the high life,” Lehner said. “There’s still a lot of people struggling.”

Oregon’s jobless rate soared to a record high of 13.3% in the pandemic’s first month as government mandates shut down restaurants, theaters and gyms and many businesses laid off workers in anticipation of an economic catastrophe.

Federal bailouts kept many businesses

afloat while expanded jobless benefits and stimulus payments cushioned the blow for workers. Oregon’s poverty rate actually fell during 2020, from 10.2% to 9.8%, and people across the spectrum of racial and ethnic groups benefited.

Oregon’s poverty rate climbed last year to 11.2%, the highest point since 2017, as pandemic relief programs expired. But the gap between white and nonwhite Oregonians continued to close.

Big gaps remain in overall income. Historically, for example, Black Oregonians have earned far less than the median household.

Nationally, the median Black household earned 62% of what white households earned last year. Hispanic households earned 74% as much as white households.

Inflation remains stubbornly high, and rising prices tend to be hardest on those with the least, because they spend more of their income on daily necessities like rent, gas and food.