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BRIEFING

Bill would allow human composting

A bill before the Legislature would make Oregon the second state to allow human composting as an alternative to traditional burial or cremation.

House bill 2574, sponsored by Reps. Pam Marsh and Brian L. Clem, would allow bodies to be disposed of by alternative processes, including natural organic reduction — an accelerated decomposition process that turns bodies into soil within weeks, KOIN reported.

It also clarifies rules surrounding alkaline hydrolysis, known as aqua cremation, and extends other funeral industry privileges and responsibilities to include natural organic reduction.

A public hearing for the bill was set for Monday afternoon in the House Committee on Business and Labor.

Almost 100 people had submitted written testimony as of Monday morning, overwhelmingly in support of the bill. Most cited environmental reasons for their desire to be composted. Cremation uses more energy than composting, and traditional burial involves harsh chemicals and takes up land.

U.S. construction spending rises

Spending on U.S. construction projects rose 1.7% in January as new homebuilding continues to lift the sector.

Last month's increase followed small revised gains in December and November.

Spending on residential construction rose 2.5% in January, with single-family home projects up 3%, the Commerce Department reported Monday.

Despite an economy that's been battered for nearly a year because of the coronavirus pandemic, historically low interest rates and city dwellers seeking more space in the suburbs and beyond has boosted home sales. Last week, the Commerce Department reported that sales of new homes jumped 4.3% in January, and are 19.3% higher than they were last year at this time.

In a separate report, the government reported that applications for building permits spiked 10.4% in January.

Manufacturing hits 3-year high

U.S. manufacturing expanded in February at the fastest pace in three years.

The Institute for Supply Management reported Monday that its gauge of manufacturing activity rose to a reading of 60.8% last month, 2.1 percentage-points above the January level of 58.7%.

It was the strongest performance since February 2018. Any reading above 50 indicates expansion in the manufacturing sector. The 60.8% reading last month matched a similar reading in February 2018 and the level in those months was the highest since a reading of 61.4% in May 2004.

Manufacturers are benefiting from a shift in spending, with Americans spending money on homes and other projects rather than going out to restaurants or risking shopping indoors, Fiore said.

— Bulletin wire reports

Panel urges U.S. to boost tech skills

BY MATT O'BRIEN
The Associated Press

An artificial intelligence commission led by former Google CEO Eric Schmidt is urging the U.S. to boost its AI skills to counter China, including by pursuing "AI-enabled" weapons — something that Google itself has shied away from on ethical grounds.

Schmidt and current executives from Google, Microsoft, Oracle and Amazon are

among the 15 members of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, which released its final report to Congress on Monday.

"To win in AI we need more money, more talent, stronger leadership," Schmidt said Monday.

The report says that machines that can "perceive, decide, and act more quickly" than humans and with more accuracy are going to be deployed for military purposes

— with or without the involvement of the U.S. and other democracies. It warns against unchecked use of autonomous weapons but expresses opposition to a global ban.

It also calls for "wise restraints" on the use of AI tools such as facial recognition that can be used for mass surveillance.

"We have to develop technology that preserves our Western values, but we have

to be prepared for a world in which not everyone is doing that," said Andrew Moore, a commissioner and the head of Google Cloud AI.

The report calls for a "White House-led strategy" to defend against AI-related threats, to set standards on how intelligent machines can be used responsibly and to boost U.S. research and development to maintain the nation's technological advantage over China.

Buffett says he overpaid for Precision Castparts

BY MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

Warren Buffett stated plainly Saturday what had been obvious for some time — he overpaid, by a lot, for Precision Castparts Corp.

"PCC is far from my first error of that sort," Buffett told investors in his annual shareholder letter. "But it's a big one."

Berkshire Hathaway, Buffett's investment firm, paid \$37 billion for the Portland company in 2016, the year the sale was completed. It's the largest sum ever paid for an Oregon business, and it remains Buffett's largest outright acquisition ever.

But Precision Castparts' revenues stalled in the years following the deal, then plunged 29% last year. The pandemic and Boeing's 737 MAX crisis took a profound toll on aerospace manufacturing, one of Precision Castparts' key markets.

The Portland company reported \$7.3 billion in sales for 2020, according to financial results Berkshire Hathaway released Saturday, Precision Castparts' lowest revenue since 2011.

Last year, Berkshire Hathaway wrote down the value of the 2016 deal by \$10 billion and Precision Castparts eliminated 13,000 jobs worldwide, 40% of its total workforce. The company laid off 717 Oregon workers in the spring. Its Redmond facility, PCC Schlosser, employed more than 450 people in 2109, according to Economic Development for Central Oregon's 2019 Central Oregon profile.

As a whole Precision Castparts remains among the state's largest industrial employers.

"No one misled me in any way — I was simply too optimistic about PCC's normalized profit potential," Buffett wrote. "Last year, my miscalculation was laid bare by adverse developments throughout the aerospace industry, PCC's most important source of customers."

Precision Castparts makes large metal components for aircraft, electrical generators and other heavy industry.

There's some cause for optimism in the months ahead. Boeing's 737 MAX, grounded for 19 months after two deadly crashes, is again flying and the company is delivering new jets. And with the pandemic in steep decline across the U.S., air travel is poised to pick up this year.

"No one misled me in any way — I was simply too optimistic about PCC's normalized profit potential."

— Warren Buffett, in his annual shareholder letter

Pooches get trained to sniff out pathogens and pests



Ashley Rodgers/Courtesy of Texas Tech University via Capital Press

Nathan Hall said he hopes that detection dogs will eventually be able to save farmers many millions of dollars annually by sniffing out agricultural pests and pathogens before they spread.

BY SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

A national research team is starting a four-year project that involves training dogs to sniff out pests and pathogens, including spotted lanternfly eggs and powdery mildew.

For decades, people have trained detection dogs to sniff out criminals, drugs, explosives and diseases. Now, with a \$475,000 Agriculture and Food Research Initiative grant, researchers are studying whether dogs can detect agricultural pests and pathogens.

Nathan Hall, Texas Tech University assistant professor of companion animal science, said he hopes dogs eventually save farmers many millions of dollars in damage annually.

"We're hoping dogs can detect threats early on, so farmers treat things before they spread," said Mizuho Nita, extension and research plant pathologist at Virginia Tech, Hall's co-researcher.

Detection dogs have been used in agriculture before — to recognize citrus greening disease, for example — but only on a small scale.

When people hear of detection dogs, Hall said, they typically imagine expensive, purebred working dogs. But Hall's team will train 70 dogs representing many breeds.

"We're not going to be breed-specific," said Hall.

He said all breeds have excellent noses. The question is not whether a dog can detect scents, but whether it wants to. Some breeds, and specific dogs within breeds, are more motivated.

In one experiment with a pug, German shepherd and greyhound, the pug performed best.

"The winner by far was the pug, which shocked us," he said.

Another misconception about scent work is that it's work. In fact, canine experts say, dogs appear to think of scent detection as a game.

"We call it 'work,' but it's not actually work for the dog. It's play," said Hall.

In phase one of experimentation, Nita, the plant pathologist, will supply Hall with spotted lanternfly eggs and vineyard clippings inoculated with powdery mildew.

In the lab, Hall will train dogs to recognize each scent. Like teaching a dog to roll over, each time the dog does what's expected, it's rewarded.

Erica Feuerbacher, also on the team and assistant professor of applied animal behavior and welfare at Virginia Tech, said researchers will test dogs'

limitations. For example, they'll test how soon after inoculation and from how far away a dog can recognize scent.

Phase two will take place in farmers' fields. The researchers will partner with the National Association of Canine Scent Work, an organization that teaches members, both professionals and amateurs, how to scent-train.

According to Amy Herot, co-founder, the organization has about 25,000 registered dogs.

"I think dogs' skills are underappreciated and underutilized," said Herot.

If the project is successful, the researchers say they'll create curriculum and certification tests.

Eventually, Hall envisions some people becoming dog entrepreneurs farms can hire; he also expects some farmers will train their own dogs. Feuerbacher said she hopes to see nonprofits and volunteer groups.

The researchers are starting with spotted lanternfly eggs and powdery mildew, but they hope this will be replicable for other crop threats.

"We have high hopes for it, but we still don't know. We're just doing proof of concept at this point, but I think there's a lot of potential," said Nita, the plant expert.

As women drop out of the workforce, moms call for more aid

BY JULIA FANZERES
Bloomberg News

As women have left the U.S. workforce in droves, in what some economists have deemed the first female recession, calls for structural changes to support them are growing louder.

Since the pandemic took hold, more than 2 million women have dropped out of the workforce. The crisis has exposed the burdens on working women but also provided an opportunity for substantive

change, according to Reshma Saujani, founder and chief executive officer of Girls Who Code.

"The infrastructure of child care is broken," Saujani said recently at the Aspen Institute's RESET Conference with Bloomberg Economics. "Nobody can afford it and it's not seen as something that we simply need in our society — and that has to change."

Saujani has spearheaded an effort calling on the Biden administration to enact a "Mar-

shall Plan for Moms." It presses for short-term monthly payments depending on needs and resources and advocates for policies like paid family leave, affordable child care and pay equity.

A group of 50 high-profile women publicly signed on to the effort in January, and last week the founder of Craigslist, Craig Newmark, announced a \$500,000 donation to Girls Who Code in support of the plan.

"Mothers are facing the brunt of this pandemic, and it is on all of us to step up and ensure that we are providing them with the relief and compensation they deserve," said Newmark. "That is why I'm making an investment in the Marshall Plan (for) Moms so that we can continue to raise awareness and call on our elected leaders to take action now."

Women were hard hit in this economic recession because it was the first led by the ser-

vice sector, Betsey Stevenson, an economics professor at the University of Michigan, said at the Aspen event. That compares with the 2008 financial crisis when many of the jobs lost were in goods-producing industries, which are more male dominated, she said.

"If we think about things like education, and health services, 78% of those jobs are held by women," said Stevenson. "And that got hit really hard in this pandemic."