

Voters could be asked to decide future of forestry practices

By SAM STITES
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

SALEM — A political fight over how Oregon manages its forests and timber activity could be resolved by voters next fall.

Two separate sets of ballot initiatives with contrary views of forestry in Oregon have been filed with the state Elections Division. One side seeks to insulate current practices from change and the other aims to create new regulations that prohibit certain techniques they feel are harmful to the environment and Oregonians.

Last week, Jim James and his fellow chief petitioners filed initiatives they're calling the "Health Forests and Wildfire Reduction Plan." They would keep the regulation of forest and timber practices on all state and privately owned lands in the hands of professional foresters, scientists and the Oregon Board of Forestry.

The plan would require the state Forestry Department to report new forestry regulations to the state board for review. The measures would add four members to the board representing scientific forestry fields and timber interests. The package also would amend Oregon's constitution to the state to compensate landowner if state actions reduce property values.

James is a professional forester based out of Foster and the executive director of the Oregon Small Woodlands Association, a lobbying group that advocates for private forest owners. The initiatives he's promoting were filed in response to a



The HK Complex Fire, seen from Madison Butte, burned acres of forest approximately 15 miles north of Monument in August. Umatilla National Forest Photo/East Oregonian

set of prospective measures called the "Oregon Forest Waters Protection" package.

"I believe that our forests are at a huge risk from the ballot measures proposed by radical, anti-forestry activists. We need these petitions to be successful in continuing to protect our management of forests," he said.

The opposing initiatives were refiled at the beginning of October by Kate Crump, a resident of Rockaway Beach, and two other petitioners after their original package was rejected

for violating the initiative process.

One goal of Crump's initiative package is to prohibit aerial spraying of pesticides on a forest clear cut within 500 feet of forest rivers and streams, especially those that feed watersheds used for potable water. It would also greatly reduce the logging operations in proximity to water bodies.

Crump said the Oregon Forest Practices Act has been enforced for too long with little change, especially relating to watersheds that

supply potable water systems. She believes the ballot is the best way to achieve her goal because people are concerned about protecting their drinking water.

"We've had a ton of support, and I think people are really concerned," she said. "This is something that's been on the minds of many coastal residents and Oregonians across the state."

Each campaign submitted three proposed ballot measures to the state. Once the language is approved, they will have to get 1,000

voter signatures to receive a ballot title from the state Attorney General and receive public comment. If there are no challenges to ballot title, they will launch full-blown signature gathering to put the measures on the November 2020 ballot. The signature this cycle is 112,020 for statutory laws and 149,360 for constitutional amendments.

James is motivated in part by the explosion of major wildfires that Oregon and other western states have seen in recent years. He

believes active forest management — including harvesting, stand improvement and thinning — are crucial to mitigating wildfires.

"Everyone knows that unmanaged forests are more prone to catastrophic wildfires. The last thing Oregonians need are more wildfires on our landscape," he said. "It impacts the entire citizenship of our state, and I believe these petitions will help the ability to manage forests in a way that prevents forest fire."

According to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, roughly 80% of acres burned by wildfire in Oregon in the past decade were on unmanaged federal lands. Specifically, James and his fellow petitioners are hoping to protect the rights of private property owners to clear cut and use certain herbicides targeting invasive species, which allow replanted trees to grow into new, healthy forests.

Gallatin Public Affairs, a political communications and strategy firm with offices in Portland, was hired to run the campaign promoting the Healthy Forests and Wildfire Reduction package. Campaign manager Sara Duncan said Wednesday the signature gathering process to gain the 1,000 sponsor signatures needed to qualify for the ballot titling process is now underway.

On Oct. 29, Crump and her group filed 3,608 signatures in favor of their three initiatives and received draft ballot titles this week. The public comment period as part of the ballot titling process will remain open for those initiatives until Nov. 20.

New director overhauls Oregon's response to mental health issues

By SAM STITES
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

SALEM — Finding a director to run a key new division of the Oregon Health Authority vexed Pat Allen for months.

The agency director worked with hundreds of internal and external stakeholders to search for someone who would bring experience and familiarity with Oregon's forlorn behavioral health system. Allen needed someone to overhaul critical state services provided to the one in six Oregonians dealing with mental illness or substance abuse.

"Over those months I became convinced that every state's behavioral health system is screwed up, but they're each screwed up in their own way," Allen said. "I really thought that local expertise was critical. We took several runs at trying to find the right candidate and never really got there."

He found that those recruited to lead the behavioral health subdivision were well aware of the challenges facing Oregon's emergency in mental health.

Mass homelessness, higher-than-average rates of addiction and suicide, a state psychiatric hospital nearly full and a system of community mental health programs that severely lack resources all needed attention.

Taking on the task of renovating the unit of state government responsible for looking after Oregon's most troubled residents was not attractive.

But where others saw a chaotic mess, Steve Allen saw opportunity.

At the time of the Oregon Health Authority's search, Steve Allen, 63, was working with lawmakers, advocacy groups and behavioral health specialists to craft policy that would become Senate Bill 937, otherwise known as the Improving People's Access to Community-based Treatment, Support and Services program (IMPACTS).

He was a consultant from the Washington, D.C.-based Council of State Governments Justice Center tasked



Oregon Capital Bureau photo by Sam Stites

Steve Allen, Oregon's director of behavioral health, stands outside the Barbara Walters Department of Human Services Building in Salem.

to help Oregon. He helped design the plan to infuse \$10.6 million in grants to Oregon's counties, tribes and regional consortiums to strengthen services for people who frequently cycle through jails, courts and hospitals.

"I wanted to look at what the state could do differently to slow or stop that trajectory, and what additional services could be provided," Allen said.

During his work on the 2019 legislation, Allen had the opportunity to see a lot of the state and meet many passionate people in communities dealing with these problems.

Pat Allen co-chaired the SB 937 work group, and the pair — who are not related — became familiar with one another's history, strengths and leadership styles.

"I was just so impressed with the quality of (Pat's) leadership — clear, thoughtful, decisive, self-reflective. He's the kind of leader that I knew I could work for," Allen said. "Having just worked in 10 states, the atmosphere here in Oregon was that so many people were coming together and saying, we need to create an environment in which we can do better for the people of Oregon."

The nationwide search came down to a conversation between the two, and it couldn't have come at a better time. Mike Morris, who took over as interim behavioral health director following Royce Bowlin's resignation after the Health

Authority's 2018 reorganization, had just retired.

"I came to realize a couple things. First, (Steve) is an honest-to-God national expert with experience in the trenches delivering care and running and operating statewide systems," Pat Allen said. "Also, he just has an incredible way with stakeholders and clients, and he brings no ego."

From his days as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, directing the mental health programs for the entire Minnesota prison system and consulting for the Council of State Governments, Steve Allen gained national acclaim in the realm of behavioral health.

Pat Allen looks to his new director to improve accountability and transparency in state operations.

Since taking over in April at a salary of \$225,000, Allen has continued touring the state, hosting even more stakeholder listening sessions and devising a new approach to the state's coordination of more than \$2 billion in spending on behavioral health care treatment.

He's heard that due to Oregon's housing shortage, the stakes are really high. Those who experience an episodic break or mental health crisis can end up losing their jobs and becoming homeless. Getting care once on the streets isn't easy in Oregon, Allen said.

"It's very difficult in Oregon to work your way out of that," he said. "It's this vicious cycle that we have to attend to."

Unions see decline in state workers paying dues

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

SALEM — Oregon's largest public employee unions have seen double-digit declines in the number of state workers paying dues, state data show.

Together, SEIU 503 and AFSCME Council 75 represent about 29,000 workers employed by state agencies.

A shrinking share of those workers have chosen to be members, though, according to data maintained by the state Department of Administrative Services and provided to the Oregon Capital Bureau through a public records request.

Until last year, unions representing workers in the public sector divided workers into two groups: members and "fair share" dues-payers.

Workers who wanted to pay full membership dues could do so, and could vote and run for leadership positions in the union.

Workers who didn't want to support the ideological stances or political work of the union had another option. They could pay "fair share" dues instead. That arrangement changed in June 2018, when the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Janus vs. AFSCME that government workers couldn't be required to pay any fee to a union representing them, including "fair share" assessments.

Gordon Lafer, a professor at the University of Oregon's Labor Education and Research Center, has an analogy for the Janus decision.

"I always think of this as, if the city of Eugene told me that the part of my tax that goes to pay for the fire department is now optional, but they'll still come and put out the flames if my house catches on fire," Lafer said.

You may not opt out of paying the tax necessarily because you're against the fire department, but because "times are tough and one

of your bills just became optional," he said.

The Supreme Court's decision means that the unions representing public sector workers no longer receive "fair share" payments.

Separately from that, the number of state workers who are full union members declined since mid-2018, the data from the state show.

Together, the two phenomena mean the number of state workers paying dues has dropped — by nearly 26% to SEIU 503, and by about 16% to AFSCME Council 75 — since June 2018. For SEIU 503, that has meant that 5,555 fewer state workers are paying dues, and for AFSCME Council 75, about 1,009.

As of Sept. 30, about 70% of the people SEIU 503 represents in state government are members of the union, while about 80% of AFSCME state workers are members.

The unions contend those numbers are just one plot point in a different story.

They say public employee unions have bounced back in the face of what many observers had opined would be a major hit to unions' income, and by extension, their power.

"The Janus decision was supposed to be the death knell of the labor movement," said Ben Morris, a spokesman for SEIU 503. "That was the narrative that was put out there around that. And we are just not seeing that happen."

Morris acknowledged that there have been challenges.

"Losing fair share fees is a hit," Morris said. "No doubt. But the resiliency of the membership at a time where, you know, we have organizations like the Freedom Foundation going to people and saying 'drop your union' every single day and we're just not seeing that happen, is a really big deal."

Lafer also says that the drop in union membership

since Janus has been less than the unions and their detractors anticipated.

"People on both sides were talking about (a) 30 to 40% fall-off in the six months or year before the Janus decision came down," Lafer said.

Although the overall trend in the year and three months between June 2018 and September 2019 has been downward, Morris points to a recent bump — between June of this year and the end of September — of about 900 new SEIU 503 members in state government.

He ties that bump to the July settlement of a new two-year contract that secured raises of 10 to 15% for state workers represented by SEIU 503.

"There's a story to tell here that despite historic challenges to public sector unions, at least, our union is coming through strong," Morris said.

David Kreisman, a spokesman for AFSCME Council 75, also emphasized that union's growth.

"While we've seen impressive growth elsewhere in our public sector organizing, as well as in the private sector, we recognize that there will always be a small number of people who don't see the intrinsic value in being active members in their union," Kreisman said in a written statement. "At the same time, there are newly hired state employees who simply haven't signed up yet."

In the year and a half since Janus, AFSCME Council 75 has been organizing new groups of workers, including graduate researchers and house officers at Oregon Health and Science University.

The Freedom Foundation, which urges public employees to quit their unions, has claimed credit for a membership decline among unionized government workers. It has organized drives and publicity campaigns to urge workers to leave.