

Cap and trade supporters a vocal minority in Eastern Oregon

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
STAFF WRITER

Cap and trade had already become the most contentious issue for the second year in a row, but at least on Feb. 4, the Oregon Senate was still in Salem to debate it.

Of the 103 people who signed up to testify for and against Senate Bill 1530 at a Senate Committee, only one of them identified themselves as being from Eastern Oregon — Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees Chairwoman Kat Brigham.

By the time Brigham spoke, the committee had been discussing the finer points of some amendments to the bill for more than an hour. But she set the stakes in simple terms: Without action, a rapidly warming planet would threaten a way of life her people have practiced for thousands of years.

“All of us are going to feel the impacts of climate change,” she said. “The tribes are going to feel it more because we live off the land. Our culture, our history is all a part of the land.”

About three weeks later, most Republicans would join together in a bicameral walkout to deny Democrats the necessary quorum to pass SB 1530.

Their ranks included Northeast Oregon’s entire legislative delegation — Rep. Greg Barreto, R-Cove, Rep. Greg Smith, R-Hep- pner, and Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena.

Business in Salem is now frozen over cap and trade, a program that “caps” carbon emissions for polluting businesses at a certain level and sets up a marketplace where they can “trade” credits that can keep them under that threshold.

Many of the GOP’s complaints about the Democrats’ handling of cap and trade are procedural: a rushed process, an unwillingness to include Republican amendments, refusal to send the issue to voters.

But to Republicans, it’s also another battle in the urban-rural divide, a law mostly supported by peo-

ple in the Willamette Valley but imposed on rural Oregonians who don’t want it and will feel it in the form of higher gas and electricity prices.

Republicans have put out statements saying they’re representing the needs of 2 million Oregonians, citing the various county commissions and organizations that have passed resolutions or proclamations opposing cap and trade, including the half-million people represented by the Eastern Oregon Counties Association.

But Eastern Oregon isn’t a monolith, as evidenced by the tribes.

Tribal spokesman Chuck Sams said the tribes had already started to notice changes in the microclimates at their fisheries in the 1930s through the 1950s, and by the 1980s were looking at ways to mitigate its effects.

The tribes call the natural resources that have traditionally sustained the tribes First Foods, a list that includes berries, roots and salmon.

Sams said the advent of industrial farming may be a boon for supermarkets, but it also creates carbon emissions and threatens areas that used to produce berries and roots.

Warming rivers also threaten salmon in the Columbia River and its various tributaries.

Over in Heppner, Hunter Houck describes the local effects of climate change in terms of natural disaster and agriculture: the extended droughts that increase the prevalence of wildfires, the floods that erode soil and make it harder to plant crops, the carbon dioxide-filled atmosphere that make it easier for invasive plant species to thrive.

At age 14, Houck has already organized climate change protests in his hometown and questioned U.S. Rep. Greg Walden’s position on global warming.

In an email, he had some critical words for the legislators who walked out.

“They have the option to vote against a bill. If they disagree with a piece

of legislation, they should vote in opposition, but they shouldn’t make it impossible for people in favor to vote that way,” he wrote. “These legislators are turning a blind eye towards my generation, the generation who will have to suffer the consequences of their actions.”

Although organizations that support efforts to reduce climate change are much less prevalent in Eastern Oregon than they are west of the Cascades, they do exist.

The Eastern Oregon Climate Change Coalition, known as EOC3 for short, was formed as a nonprofit in 2017 to educate locals on the effects of climate change.

EOC3 Chairman Dave Powell said the group meets monthly to hold discussions on climate change, and although its membership fluctuates, the group reaches about 100 people in its email list.

A retired forester with the U.S. Forest Service who was stationed in Pendleton for 24 years, Powell said his understanding of climate change was enhanced by the way he observed its effect on the forests.

“Forestry is all about the long term,” he said.

Powell said he can understand some of the Republicans’ objections to the bill, he just wants them to come to one of his group’s meetings and explain their position.

Fighting climate change can be a lonely position in Eastern Oregon.

When Houck helped organize a climate protest in 2019, he noted that climate change was a “taboo” topic in town.

Electurally, Republicans dominate state and federal office in Umatilla and Morrow counties, and have long been hostile to policies like cap and trade.

Chuck LeBold of Union admits that the legislators who walked out are probably representing a majority of their constituents and that his positions on climate change firmly put him in the minority.

“It’s a small group, but over here in Eastern Ore-



HH file photo

Coho salmon smolts shoot out of a hose into the Lostine River on March 10, 2019, outside of Wallowa. Tribal members say climate change has negatively impacted First Foods such as salmon, which is why they support cap and trade.

gon it’s definitely a minority viewpoint for sure,” he said. “I just don’t think a lot of the folks have really been exposed to the other side of the issue.”

Like Powell, LeBold said he came to understand the effects of climate change by working for the U.S. Forest Service, which he retired from in 2017.

A veteran climate change activist, LeBold thinks the current cap-and-trade bill doesn’t go far enough, but it’s a good first step.

As a sovereign nation, the Confederated Umatilla tribes has presented the cap-and-trade bill as a way for the state to join in an effort the tribes are already making.

Sams said some of the tribes ongoing efforts include installing a wind turbine and solar panels at Tamastlikt Cultural Institute and electrical vehicle charging stations at Wildhorse Resort and Casino.

Before finishing her remarks to the Senate committee, Brigham said if she could put walls around the Umatilla Indian Reservation to protect its resources, she would.

But she understands that natural resources flow freely between the reservation and the rest of the country, regardless of walls, and they



HH file photo

An Oregon Department of Forestry firefighter uses a hose line to douse some flames while battling a fire on Cabbage Hill east of Pendleton in 2018. Supporters of cap and trade say fighting climate change will reduce fires



HH file photo

A stacker reclaimer digs up scoops of coal to feed a conveyor belt that fuels the 600-megawatt Boardman Coal Plant.

must be shared to ensure their survival in the era of climate change.

“We have been taught as tribal leaders that we need to protect those resources

so we can live off the land, breathe the air, and drink clean, clear water,” she said. “So it’s very important to all of us. Not just the tribes, but to all of us.”

Republican lawmakers question Democrats’ hardline stance

By **PHIL WRIGHT**
EO MEDIA GROUP

Two Eastern Oregon lawmakers remain perplexed over the Democrats’ refusal to allow the voters to decide the fate of controversial climate legislation. The majority party’s political calculus, they said, does not pencil out.

While Republican legislators remain absent from the Capitol over a proposal to reduce Oregon’s greenhouse gas emissions, Democrats in the House and Senate said they were determined to stand against demands to refer the proposal to voters.

Republican Rep. Greg Smith of Heppner said last week that emotions are running high, and leadership on the two sides are talking, but the solution to the stalemate remains clear.

“In the end, Oregonians need to have a say on this issue,” Smith said. “They need to be able to vote yes or no on it.”

Republican Sen. Bill Hansell of Athena said he has heard from constituents of his district, which includes Umatilla, Union and Wallowa counties, and they oppose cap and trade for good reasons. Oregon emits 65 million metric tons of carbon each year, he said, while the United States as a whole contributes 6.5 billion tons.

“We have 1% of the total U.S. emissions,” he said, and on the global scale, Oregon is a tenth of 1%. On that front, he said, the Democrats don’t have the argument to support the need for



Smith

Hansell

the policy.

“This will not reduce carbon, but only raise taxes,” Hansell said. “It does not make sense.”

Why the Democrats won’t budge, Smith said, is a head scratcher.

“I think those who are in the majority believe that it is their responsibility to handle this. They believe they have the staff and technical assistance to handle this,” he said.

But if the proposal is so good for Oregon, the pair of legislators said, Democrats should have the confidence Oregon voters will deliver. The voting math tends to favor the Democrats, with almost 974,000 registered voters in the party, according to the January registration data from the Oregon Secretary of State, a bump from December 2019 of nearly 3,500.

Republicans are verging on 702,000 voters in Oregon, but they dropped 92 voters from December 2019. Nonaffiliated voters remain the second largest registration block with a little more than 960,000, an increase of more than 4,200 from the end of 2019.

If voters were to approve cap and trade, Smith and Hansell said the Democrats come out looking good.

But, they contended, Democrats also would look good if they refer the measure to the public and it fails. In that outcome, Democrats could at least say the will of the people prevailed and democracy in Oregon is strong.

Democrats in the Oregon House moved to force Republicans back to the Capitol on Thursday, issuing subpoenas to 21 state representatives that would compel them to explain their disappearing act from Salem.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said a process server has been hired to chase down wayward Republicans, although they may be out of state. If they obeyed, the representatives would have to appear before the Democratically controlled House Rules Committee on Thursday, March 5.

“Be prepared to testify about your unexcused absences during the 2020 regular session of the Legislative Assembly, the need

for members to fulfill their oaths of office and constitutional duties,” the subpoena states.

Legislative committees, minus Republican members, have continued working on bills and policy discussions. But it’s unclear if their legislative work will result in new laws.

Smith said the bills coming out of House committees are stacking up. Were Republicans to return, Smith said their first motion should be to kick those bills back to committee for review.

“It would be extremely incompetent of me to vote on those bills without reviewing them,” Smith said. “We need to make sure what is in the legislation.”

The House also would need to prioritize the bills, he said, starting with the budget and policies related to the budget.

To date, just three bills have passed both chambers and been sent to Gov. Kate Brown to sign into law.

Both chambers, in a for-

mality, convened for less than 15 minutes on Wednesday and adjourned.

“I wish the Republicans would understand the importance of their being here,” said President Peter Courtney, told the Senate.

One bill is aimed at honoring deceased veterans. Another would protect water rights in southern Oregon. Others would reform the state’s public defense system, boost affordable housing in Pendleton, address school bullying, require building standards in tsunami zones and make insulin more affordable.

“So wherever you are out there, will you please come back?” pleaded Courtney.

More than 40 bills await a vote in the Senate, 38 of which the House has passed. The Senate has passed 14 bills now waiting a final vote in the House.

In the House, 118 measures await action, of which seven are ready for third reading and a vote. Another seven Senate bills are ready

to come before the House for a vote as well.

Smith said the bills that need approval “weighs heavily on my shoulders.” As a senior member of the budget process, he said, he knows Oregonians have needs the Legislature needs to address. Hansell, too, said he lamented the holdup of legislation that helps everyday Oregonians.

But the two Republicans also said the people of their districts have been clear that cap and trade is the highest legislative priority.

Smith said climate policy “becomes religion on both sides of the aisle, and leadership on both sides needs to work toward middle ground.” He suggested Republican and Democrat leaders find three or four members of each party that are not so invested in cap and trade, put them in a room together and see what deal they could produce to bring the sides closer.

The likelihood of that, he said, is slim to none.

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