

Federal land managers face lawsuit

BY MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Federal land managers are facing a lawsuit alleging they've violated the Freedom of Information Act by failing to timely release documents about the controversial River Democracy Act.

Nearly 4,700 miles of rivers and streams in Oregon would be federally designated as "wild and scenic" under the bill, which critics fear would restrict logging and grazing, among other activities.

The legislation was introduced by Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, who claim the bill would shield property rights from adverse effects while tripling the number of river miles with "wild and scenic" protections in the state.

Federal land managers testified about the bill before a congressional subcommittee last year, which prompted a FOIA request from the Western Resources Legal Center, a legal education nonprofit.

"To date, we have not been provided with any information and therefore resorted to legal recourse under the Freedom of Information Act," said Caroline Lobdell, the organization's executive director.

"The public should not have to wait for the proposed permanent designations to occur before they are allowed to understand the legislation," she said in an email.

Testimony at the hearing indicated government officials have an "enhanced understanding of the process, basis and potential im-

acts" of adding waterways to the Wild and Scenic River System, according to the legal center's lawsuit.

For example, the testimony included information about how many river miles and surrounding acres managed by the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management would be affected by the bill.

The hearing revealed that government officials "spent significant time analyzing" the legislation's "effect and methods of enforcement," including the need to develop "comprehensive river management plans" that guide how it would be implemented, according to the legal center.

The legal center wants to access that information to better explain the River Democracy Act to the

public and its constituents, such as farmers and ranchers, who may "rely on public lands for their livelihood."

In late October and early November 2021, the center submitted FOIA requests for records pertaining to the River Democracy Act, including congressional communications related to the hearing.

No determinations regarding the FOIA requests have yet been made by the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management or their government overseers — the USDA and Interior Department — even though legally mandated deadlines have passed, the complaint said.

In light of the "months-long delay" and "lack of communication," the plaintiff believes the govern-

ment "seeks to hide records from the public" regarding its interpretation of the bill, the complaint said.

The federal agencies had not yet responded to requests for comment about the lawsuit as of press time.

The River Democracy Act has "significant implications" for managing roughly 3 million acres of "fire prone forests" in the state, and it stands to reason that government officials testified "based on information, data and analysis provided to them," Lobdell said.

"We would like to see that information so that Oregonians can understand the implications for management of the proposed lands and resulting impacts to Oregonians and the public so they can meaningfully engage in the process," she said.

USDA: Farm input costs rising



Kathy Aney/Hermiston Herald

Umapipe farmer Tim Leber on May 31, 2022, leans against the Case Quadtrac tractor he uses to fertilize and seed his crops. Fertilizer prices have doubled in the past year.

BY SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

A USDA report released June 30 shows that farm input costs continue to rise, putting additional financial pressure on farmers and ranchers.

The study, called the Agricultural Prices report, looked at farm input costs in May 2022 compared to input costs one month prior and one year prior. USDA collected data for the May Prices Paid Index by randomly contacting more than 8,500 farms nationwide with an average response rate of 75% to 80%.

The report found that farmers across America continue to face rising costs for feed, fertilizer, fuels and other inputs.

In May, the price of livestock feed increased 0.8% from April and 15% from May 2021. Although concentrates fell in price, that was more than offset by higher prices for complete feeds, feed grains, supplements, hay and forages.

Fertilizer in May cost 6.2% more than it did the month prior, in April. Prices for potash and phosphate didn't change month-over-month, but prices rose for nitrogen and mixed fertilizer.

The rise in cost is even more stark when compared to a year ago. The May 2022 cost of fertilizer was 77% higher than it was in May 2021.

Chemical costs remained static between April and May of 2022, but prices this May were 33% higher than last May.

The May fuel index was up 6% from April, and fuel cost 67% more this May than it did in May of 2021. USDA data shows that, compared to the month prior, May prices were higher for diesel and gasoline but lower for LP gas.

Machinery in May cost 0.6% less than it did in April — one of the few areas where input costs decreased. Prices slightly declined for tractors, self-propelled machines and other machinery. However, machinery costs were 19% higher than a year ago.

In a statement this week, American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall said American farmers and ranchers continue to "grapple with increased costs of growing food and fiber."



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