



Volume 43

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Number 11

What's the matter with Washington?



Labor costs are eating up profits for Washington apple growers, according to the Northwest Horticultural Council. (Don Jenkins/Capital Press)

Experts see growing interest and potential for niche segment

By Don Jenkins
Capital Press

Washington in 2024 ranked No. 1 in producing apples, blueberries, hops, pears, onions and sweet cherries. It was No. 2 in grapes, potatoes, raspberries and winter wheat, grapes.

And in take-home farmer pay, it ranked No. 50. Despite excel-

ling at growing high-value crops, Washington agriculture actually lost money, according to the USDA.

That's not to say every farmer lost money. Cattle ranchers are enjoying a run of high prices. But as a whole, production expenses exceeded gross cash income. The USDA estimated returns to oper-

ators at minus \$396.2 million.

Washington wasn't just last. It was dead last. Alaska was the only other state with negative returns — minus \$10.5 million.

Washington's neighbors prospered. Idaho and Oregon farmers netted \$2.2 billion and

See WASHINGTON, Page A4

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AgriMACS to close, resulting in 145 job losses

Capital Press staff

AgriMACS — Agricultural Management and Consulting Services — notified the Washington State Employment Security Department that it intends to close all operations at several locations.

That follows on the heels of a notice earlier this year from a different Washington fruit-based business, Food Service Slicing — doing business as Crunch Pak — that it would close its plant in Selah, Wash.

AgriMACS, based in Chelan, Wash., told the department in a March 6 letter that 145 employees will be affected.

Their employment is expected to end on or about May 8, according to WARN Act paperwork.

“The reason for closure is hardship due to business circumstances,” wrote AgriMACS leadership, in a letter to the department.

More than 20 work locations in Chelan, Wash., Othello, Wash., and other communities

were listed in the WARN notice.

According to the company’s website, AgriMACS was founded in 2000 and manages more than 5,000 acres.

Services provided have included general management, horticultural and viticultural advice, fruit storage and packing placement, accounting and budget administration services, property sale and acquisition services, and investment acquisition analysis and support.

AgriMACS representatives weren’t able to be contacted for comment regarding this article.

The Food Service Slicing notice, sent in mid-January, notified the Employment Security Department that 101 employees could lose their jobs with the closure of its facility in Selah, Wash.

The plant closure was expected to take place March 31.

The shuttering of that facility was due to increased capabilities of the company’s facilities in Cashmere, Wash., as well as a broader effort to strengthen its long-term competitiveness.



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WASHINGTON:

continued from A1

\$836.7 million, respectively. California farmers made \$19 billion.

Not long ago, in 2021, Washington's returns were \$2.8 billion. Washington ranked 14th in farmer pay. The fall to the bottom began after that and the margins got thinner and thinner until Washington agriculture ran in the red.

The anecdotes match the data.

"I'm really close to bankruptcy here. I'm constantly trying to avoid it," Yakima Valley apple and hop grower Graham Gamache said.

"It doesn't make sense that Washington state agriculture is struggling so much," he said. "We have the climate. We have the water. We have a fantastic infrastructure that has developed over several decades."

Lewis County farmer Jackson Humphrey, 23, is about to begin his third year in farming. He made money in year one and lost money in year two. "It's really a stupid time to get into farming," he said.

Yakima County fruit grower Jason Matson's ancestors traveled the Oregon Trail. The family has farmed in the state since 1867. "So far we haven't screwed it up, but I'm getting nervous," he said.

So what's the matter with Washington?

"Oh, my gosh, where do we

begin?" asked Mark Herke, president of the Yakima-Klickitat Farm Association.

"It's hard for me to come up with a word to describe the situation that's not vulgar."

Production costs soar

Northeast Washington ranchers face wolves. Central Washington irrigators face drought. Northwest Washington farmers face defending their water rights. Southwest Washington farmers need markets. Apple growers want trade barriers lowered. Red raspberry growers wouldn't mind some protectionism.

They all have something in common, however: "Farmers are price takers, not price makers." The mantra likely goes in one ear and out the other unless one holds it inside and lets it sink in.

"I've been told many times — just ask more for your milk," Skagit County dairy farmer Jason Vander Kooy said.

Farmers are the first to invest in a crop and the last to be paid. And the pay days aren't keeping up with investments. Farmer gross cash income in Washington increased 18% between 2021 and 2024, while production expenses grew by 64%.

Pesticides, fertilizers and electricity all went up. Washington has the second-highest gasoline and diesel prices in the U.S. Labor

costs — both hired and contracted services — nearly doubled in three years.

In total, Washington has the eighth-highest farm production costs in the U.S., trailing only highly profitable farm states such as Iowa, Texas and Illinois.

"We have a great place for agriculture. We have the right climate and soils, but our cost of doing business is so much higher," Vander Kooy said. "The problem is Olympia. They just don't understand agriculture — how we have to compete against other states and other countries."

Washington's top crop, apples, has been especially hard hit by rising labor costs.

Washington apple growers in 2023 paid 108% of their total gross revenue for labor, according to a survey by the Northwest Horticultural Council. "That was not an anomaly. It was following a trend line," horticultural council Senior Vice President Kate Tynan said.

Labor in 2013 equaled 37% of gross revenue, according to the horticultural council. Over the next decade, revenue increased 7%, while labor costs jumped 182%.

The rise in labor costs coincided with an increase in foreign farmworkers. Washington farmers employed nearly 36,000 seasonal foreign farmworkers in 2024,

a 25% increase from 2021.

The Department of Labor sets minimum wages for H-2A workers. Washington and Oregon's H-2A wage is usually the highest or second-highest in the country.

Because there are so many foreign farmworkers, the H-2 wage — higher than the state minimum wage — sets the pay floor for domestic workers. "We all have to pay that to be competitive," Gamache said.

The Trump administration has adopted a new wage scale and rules to slow down the growth in H-2A wages. "It's hard to project what exactly will happen, but our hope is it will help," Tynan said.

Also in 2024, farmworkers began receiving overtime pay after 40 hours in a week. The state Supreme Court made the policy decision. Legislators worked out the details.

Farmers have adjusted work schedules to hold down hours for workers. "That's costing everybody on the farm — both employers and employees," Yakima Valley fruit grower Jim Willard said. "I really don't think the Legislature appreciates what they've done to agriculture."

The state Senate held a hearing this year on giving farmworkers collective-bargaining rights. Labor advocates argued a government-sanctioned process would prevent labor strife. Farmers and

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WASHINGTON:

continued from A4

farm groups said a unionized workforce could be the last straw.

The Senate decided not to advance the bill this year. "That one feels like it's a matter of time," Matson said. "They keep piling on."

Too productive

Farmers are sometimes too stellar. "We're really good at what we do," Matson said. "We're just really efficient at oversupplying the market."

Bumper crops suppress prices, but are almost commonplace.

Washington apple growers continue to outdo themselves. "We produce more apples than the world is willing to eat," Douglas County orchardist April Clayton said.

Alcohol consumption is down, especially among young adults. That's good for health, but not good for hops and grapes.

Clark County farmer Kevin Dobbins will let 600 acres go fallow this year rather than adding to the oversupply of grass seed. "I think I'll lose less money hanging out in the office than farming," he said.

Dobbins once grew berries, but cheaper foreign imports caused berries to "peter out."

"We haven't stuck our nose in fruit for years because I don't think it's viable," he said.

"I think people need to care where their food comes from," he said. "Berries go up a few pennies per pound and it's, 'Oh, crap!' How much do Snickers bars weigh per pound?"

Low commodity prices ripple through the farm economy. "Beekeepers are in the same boat as everybody else," Ephrata beekeeper Tim Hiatt said.

"We raise our prices (for pollination services) annually, but we don't keep up with inflation," he said. "It would be nice to charge

more, but we just can't because the Pacific Northwest farmers just don't have the money."

Farmers also have been hurt by processors closing. Southwest Washington farmers turned to growing barley after losing contracts to grow vegetables. But their best customer, a malting company in Vancouver, moved away. Farmers are looking for another customer, or crop.

"If we could grow 10,000 acres of corn, we could make good money. That's impossible in Western Washington," Lewis County

See WASHINGTON, Page A7



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Kitchen corner: Cooking with pork

Here are some new recipes from the National Pork Board.

Egg roll in a bowl

Ingredients

- 1 Tbsp. sesame oil
- 1 small red onion (diced)
- 1 Tbsp. minced garlic
- 1 Tbsp. ginger (finely minced)
- 1 lb. ground pork
- 2 tsp. sriracha sauce
- 1 bag coleslaw mix (14 oz.)
- 2 red bell peppers (sliced thinly)
- 1 bag matchstick carrots (10 oz.)
- 3 Tbsp. low-sodium soy sauce (or liquid aminos)
- 1 Tbsp. rice wine vinegar
- salt (to taste)
- black pepper (to taste)

Directions:

Heat sesame oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add red onion, cook 2-3 minutes. Add garlic and ginger. Cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add ground pork and Sriracha. Cook and crumble until pork is cooked through and reaches an internal temperature of 160° F, about 7-10 minutes.

Add coleslaw mix, red bell pepper, carrots, soy sauce, sesame oil, rice wine vinegar, black pepper, and salt, to taste, and stir until well combined. Cook, stirring occasionally, until cabbage is tender, about 5 minutes.

Spoon pork-cabbage mixture in to a serving bowl. Drizzle with sauce of choice and garnish, if desired.

Optional for garnish: sliced green onions, sesame seeds, wonton strips.

Optional sauces:

hoisin or duck sauce, sriracha, hot sauce, or sweet chili garlic sauce. For a creamy sauce, mix together Greek yogurt, sriracha, lime juice and salt to taste.

Pork chop ratatouille

Ingredients:

- 2 bone-in ribeye pork chops (4oz. each)
- 2 tsp. Italian seasoning mix
- 3/4 tsp. ground black pepper
- 1/2 tsp. red pepper flakes, divided
- 2 Tbsp. olive oil, divided
- 1/2 white onion, finely chopped



Egg roll in a bowl

- 4 tsp. minced garlic, divided
- 1/2 red bell pepper, finely chopped
- 1/2 yellow bell pepper, finely chopped
- 14.5 oz. canned low sodium crushed tomatoes
- 1 small eggplant, thinly sliced
- 3 Roma tomatoes, thinly sliced
- 1 yellow summer squash, thinly sliced
- 1 zucchini, thinly sliced
- 1 Tbsp. fresh basil, thinly sliced
- 1 Tbsp. fresh parsley, finely chopped
- 1 tsp. fresh thyme leaves

Directions:

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. On a cutting board, season each pork chop with 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning, 3/4 teaspoon black pepper, 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes.

In a 12-inch oven safe skillet, heat 1 tablespoon olive oil over medium-high heat. Sear each side of pork chop until golden brown, about 1-2 minutes per side. Remove from pan to cutting board.

Add onion and 1 tablespoon olive oil to the skillet. Sauté onion until fragrant and turning translucent. Add 3 teaspoon minced garlic and bell peppers, stir to combine and sauté 10 minutes until softened. Add crushed tomatoes and stir to combine.

Bring to a simmer, add pork back to center of skillet and baste pork with tomato sauce. Remove skillet from heat.

Starting from the outer edge of the skillet, alternate sliced eggplant, tomato, squash and zucchini arranged on top of sauce. Repeat pattern working from edge to center of skillet around pork chops.

In a small bowl, whisk together remaining olive oil with remaining garlic, basil, parsley and thyme. Season with salt and pepper if desired. Drizzle herb dressing over vegetables and cover the skillet with foil.



Pork chop ratatouie

Bake for 25-30 minutes or until veggies are fork tender. Remove foil and switch oven to broil on high for 3-5 minutes, or until veggies begin to brown and pork has reached an internal temperature of 145 degrees F. Using oven mitts, remove skillet from oven and let rest 3 minutes before serving hot.

Pasta E fagiola

Ingredients:

- 1 lb Italian sausage
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 yellow onion (diced)
- 2 sprigs rosemary (minced)
- Pinch of salt and black pepper (optional)
- 3 cloves of garlic (minced)
- 1 can tomato paste (6 oz)
- 2 cups water
- 8 oz elbow macaroni pasta
- 1 can white beans, drained (15 1/2 oz)
- 1 lemon (juiced)
- 1/2 cup shredded Parmesan cheese (optional)
- 1/2 bunch parsley (chopped, optional)

Directions:

In a large pot, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add onion and cook 4-6 minutes until softened, stirring occasionally.

Add Italian sausage, rosemary and a pinch of salt and black pepper, if desired. Cook Italian sausage, breaking apart with a spoon, for 6-8 minutes until browned and aromatic.

Add garlic and tomato paste. Cook 2-3 minutes until tomato paste begins to caramelize and separate.

Add 2 cups of water. Bring to a boil; add macaroni pasta and white beans. Return to a boil then reduce heat to a simmer and cook, simmering for 8-10 minutes until macaroni is al dente and sausage reaches 160° F.

Remove pot from heat and stir in lemon juice. To serve, divide soup among 4 bowls. Top with Parmesan cheese and parsley, if desired.

Ground pork is safe to eat at 160.

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WASHINGTON:

continued from A5

farmer Dave Fenn said.

Humphrey, Fenn's grandson, was one of the farmers stuck with unsold barley. But he's finding alternative crops to grow, he said.

What worries him as a young farmer is the government, he said. "I don't want to sound super partisan, but I think the Legislature is what really spooks me."

Regulatory state

Markets change and so do government expectations, farm lobbyist John Stuhlmiller said.

"Commodity prices are going to be unstable forever," he said. "If somehow we could get regulatory stability that would be good. But it's never, 'Here's what you need to do.' It's always changing.

"The regulatory climate has dramatically ramped up in the last five to seven years," he said. "It's been gradual, and I believe it's directly related to fewer and fewer people growing their own food.

"My prediction is if the gradual tightening goes on, eventually we'll be buying food from somewhere else."

State environmental reports habitually refer to prime farmland as "degraded habitat" and the potential source of dirt, manure and chemicals running into water.

In an ongoing, high-profile case, the state Department of Ecology accuses rancher Wade King of damaging landlocked wetlands in arid Central Washington. King says he was digging out old stockwater ponds.

The Skagit Delta in northwest Washington has been farmed since the 19th century. But the National Marine Fisheries Service says preserving farmland violates the Endangered Species Act because the land could be fish habitat.

"It's setting a culture — 'We're going to make it difficult for you guys to farm,'" said Vander Kooy, whose dairy farm is in the Skagit Delta. "We just want to farm. We don't want to deal with all this, but if we don't, we'll get run over."

Regulations permeate agriculture, said Washing-

ton State Dairy Federation policy director Jay Gordon, a Grays Harbor County farmer. "State agencies, the Legislature and courts have just added to this drip, drip, drip," he said. "The word is 'systemic.'"

The state Senate passed a bill this year to make polluting water a felony, punishable by a long prison sentence. The bill died in the House, but, like collective bargaining, could rise again.

"That's what we're always staring at — someone pointing a gun at us," Matson said. "Imprisoning good people. I don't think that's a good policy."

Some bills don't need to pass to leave a long-lasting bad taste. Former Gov. Jay Inslee proposed wide mandatory riparian buffers on farmland. When it failed, he blamed indifference to salmon. A bill once clumsily proposed requiring Washington farmers to report whether they had slaves.

"To keep doing what I do, I can't allow disillusionment to creep in. But it's getting harder and harder to keep a stiff upper lip," Stuhlmiller said.

Two farms a day

The USDA counted 32,076 Washington farms in the 2022 Census of Agriculture. This was 3,717 farms fewer than in 2017.

The math worked out neatly. Washington lost two farms a day for five years. "That's not a good number," said Clayton, the Douglas County orchardist.

Judging by the USDA's returns to operators, it's only gotten worse for farmers since the last census.

Willard said he knows a man with a bulldozer. "He's as busy as can be pushing out orchards and vineyards.

"I know it's going to take another year or two for those markets to get back into balance," Willard said. "Life is not getting any more fun around here for a while."

Farmers may be stubborn enough to stick it out, Gordon said. "For 154 years my family has farmed the same land," he said. "Pride of place — that comes with farming, so we tend to hang on and hang on."

Humphrey, the third-

year farmer, was on course to become a plumber before he decided to follow into agriculture his grandfather, a 50-year farmer. "I liked plumbing," Humphrey

said. "But I think there are few occupations as morally good as feeding people."

Gamache said he spends more and more time on regulations and financing and

less and less time on farming, but plans to stay with it.

"I think I'm going to make it," he said. "I'm a damn good hop farmer."

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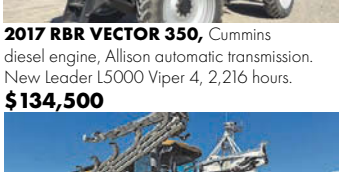
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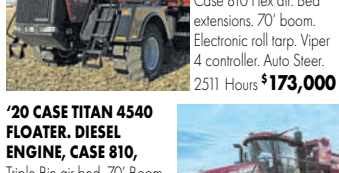
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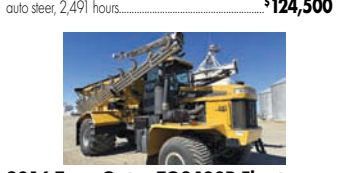
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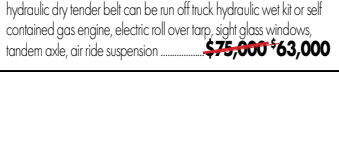
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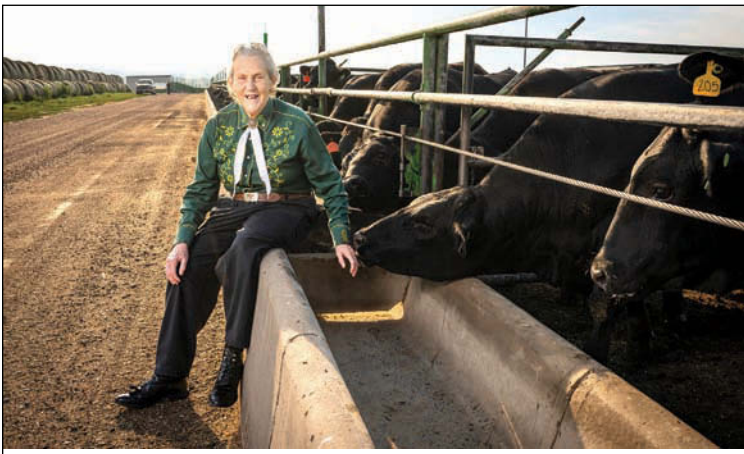
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Grandin to kick off new WSU ag dean lecture series



Temple Grandin will speak May 6 at 6 p.m. in the Cub Senior Ballroom on the WSU campus in Pullman, Wash., as the first in the Cashup Davis Family Endowed Lecture. (Courtesy Colorado State University)

By **Matthew Weaver**
Capital Press

Longtime animal welfare and autism awareness advocate Temple Grandin will kick off a new lecture series for Washington State University's agricultural college.

Grandin will speak May 6 at 6 p.m. in the Cub Senior Ballroom on the WSU campus in Pullman, Wash., as the first in the Cashup Davis Family Endowed Lecture.

The event is free and open to the public. About 600 people are expected to attend.

Raj Khosla is Cashup Davis Family Endowed Dean for WSU's College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences.

The family made the commitment that part of the endowment be used to bring "world leaders who can inspire our next generation of leaders — our students, staff and faculty members," Khosla told Capital Press.

Khosla envisions a distinguished lecture series, bringing in two global leader speakers each year.

Grandin's name "unanimously" rose to the top, as a longtime advocate for animal welfare, Khosla said.

"Our campus is so excited that she will be coming and

imparting knowledge with our students," Khosla said.

Grandin's presentation is entitled "The World Needs All Kinds of Minds."

"There's not just one way of doing business, there's so many minds that think differently, and we should embrace that element of thinking differently, and making a difference in the line of our work," WSU's Khosla said. "Nobody's small, nobody's big. We should work together in solving challenges across the planet. Animals are no less than humans. It's going to be an inspirational (speech)."

Unrelated

WSU first announced Grandin's speech March 12, prior to the campaign against the university by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and "compassionate veterinary group" Our Honor, which led to threats prompting WSU to cancel on March 16 the equine portion of its Veterinary Medicine 573 surgery laboratory course.

Grandin's speech is unrelated to the situation with the equine surgeries, Khosla's office told the Capital Press.

Grandin is also scheduled to speak at Whitworth University earlier in the day May 6, in Spokane.



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It's the Pitts: Miss Understanding

By Lee Pitts

Men can be such wimps! I have come to the conclusion that after the death of their elderly spouse women seem to have far less trouble than men who lose their spouse. Men just can't seem to live without a woman in their life but women seem to flourish without a man in theirs. This became obvious to me after seeing four blue haired widows getting smashed on wine Margaritas at Olive Garden, laughing and having such a good time the manager had to come by and ask them to tone it down.

A couple years ago I had a rancher friend who had the misfortune of losing his dog and his wife in a span of six weeks. He completely fell apart and went to seed. His once obese body was now skin and bones because he didn't even know how to boil water and his clothes wouldn't even make good shop rags they were so far gone. My friend didn't even know how to wash and dry clothes. He just wore them until they fell apart and then he'd go to the hardware store and buy new ones. It was like he was having a mid-life crises at age 75. The only thing he had going for him was he he'd inherited what was once a huge Mexican Land Grant that some distant relative had finagled the Mexican government out of.

I felt sorry for my friend and tried to help him, advising him he would be far better off just



Lee Pitts

getting a new one right away.

Shortly after his wife died I was surprised to hear that he was a regular on the dating scene. "What the heck are you doing?" I asked. "Don't you think you should show some respect to your widow who stuck by you through thick and thin and was married to you for over 50 years? You should have waited at least a year!"

Dutch researchers have found that men have on average four billion more brain cells than women but I think they lose them all after their spouse dies. My buddy got so desperate he tried finding a mate on the Internet but found no takers. Then he tried a more traditional approach by advertising in the weekly newspaper's classified ads but he came off as sounding a bit too desperate. His ad read: "Elderly rich guy in poor health looking for a new wife to cook and do laundry. PLEASE Dear God!"

When that didn't work he resorted to the old tried and true method of becoming part of the local bar scene seven nights per week. It wasn't too long before he had a new girlfriend who rode a Harley Davidson, chewed tobacco, hogged the remote control and had already

been married four times. It was a total and complete TRASH landing. His new girlfriend had spiked green and orange hair, was hopeless in the kitchen, got drunk, and liked to go dancing every night. In other words, she was the poster child for birth control.

My buddy's new main squeeze looked a little rough around the edges to me but my friend defended her and said she didn't look all that bad after nine or ten drinks. Worse still, she liked to have sex every which way seven nights a week whereas my buddy had been down to once a month in his first marriage.

Then my friend and his girlfriend went off to Las Vegas and she got him hogtied for good all legal like. Before too long my buddy started seeing the error of his ways. His new wife didn't shave her legs or under her arms, snored so loud it registered on seismographs three counties away and she had a weird fixation with firearms which made him a little nervous as two of her previous husbands had died under suspicious circumstances.

When my friend informed me that he was getting remarried just five months after the death of his first wife I blew a gasket. "Are you crazy?" I asked

He countered: "You're the one who told me that after the death of a loved one you should get another one right away to replace the one you lost."

"I was talking about getting a new dog, not a new wife you imbecile!"



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Judge: Rancher King has no clear right to a jury trial

By Don Jenkins
Capital Press

A judge ruled March 20 that Washington rancher Wade King does not have a clear legal right to a jury trial to decide whether he damaged wetlands or was just digging out dried-up stockwater ponds.

Grant County Superior Court Judge Anna Gigliotti denied King's motion for a preliminary injunction halting proceedings by the Pollution Control Hearings Board, a three-member panel appointed by the governor.

Attorneys for King and his wife, Teresa, argued the state constitution guarantees their right to a jury trial instead. State laws and court precedents, however, hold otherwise, Gigliotti said. Without a clear-cut right to a jury trial, she can't issue a preliminary injunction, she said.

"Potentially, this might be something that a higher court is going to change," she said. "But at this point, I cannot find they have a clear legal or equitable right."

The ruling allows the Department of Ecology to continue collecting evidence for a PCHB hearing. The Kings, however, are scheduled to be back in Grant County Superior Court on May 21 for a fuller hearing on whether they have the right to a jury trial.

"Today's denial is disappointing, but Washington's constitution is unambiguous that the right to a jury trial shall remain inviolate, and we intend to hold the state to that promise," Pacific Legal Foundation senior attorney Oliver Dunford said in a statement.

Ecology fined the King

Ranch \$267,540 in 2023 for allegedly damaging 23 landlocked wetlands in arid Grant and Douglas counties. Ecology also ordered the ranch to restore 14 of the wetlands. A consultant estimated restoration would cost \$3.7 million.

As required by state law, the Kings appealed the fine and order to the PCHB. While the Kings are trying to get their case moved to Grant County Superior Court, the attorney general's office is arguing to keep the appeal with the PCHB.

Ecology accuses the King Ranch of violating the state's Water Pollution Control Act.

The Kings argue the watering holes are not wetlands regulated by Ecology and that state law protects stockwater rights. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins has said state regulators are punishing a common ranching practice.

The Pacific Legal Foundation says it is representing the Kings for free. The law firm sues the government when it violates Americans' constitutional rights, according to its website.

"The Kings have spent generations building their ranch. They deserve to have their day in court before a jury of their peers, not a panel of government appointees," Dunford said.

Besides whether the state constitution guarantees jury trials, the case brings up whether the U.S. Constitution's jury trial guarantee in the Seventh Amendment applies in Washington, according to PLF.

The attorney general's office argues state courts have not recognized the Seventh Amendment.



Central Washington rancher Wade and Teresa King, seen here with their children on their ranch, are seeking a jury trial to defend themselves against allegations they damaged wetlands. (Photo courtesy of King Ranch)



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Longtime WSU expert wrangles 22 sets of triplets

By Matthew Weaver
Capital Press

MOSES LAKE, Wash. — Longtime Washington State University Extension regional animal sciences specialist Sarah Smith's sheep have given birth to 22 sets of triplets this year.

Smith runs 45 ewes on her ranch in Moses Lake, Wash. She raises Hampshire cross ewes to breed club lambs for 4-H projects, and Valais blacknose sheep.

"I try not to have triplets just because they're so much time," Smith told Capital Press. "But sometimes Mother Nature ... It definitely wasn't my plan and I've told the ewes I don't want them to re-do it again."

Smith has been a WSU Extension agent for 26 years. She wonders if reproductive technology is currently inadvertently selecting breeding traits for higher

multiple births. She's heard from other sheep ranchers who are also experiencing multiple lambs, as well as cattle ranchers with multiple calves.

"Which is kind of weird because we don't breed at the same time, even though we might be calving at the same time because of gestation length," she said.

It's more common for sheep producers in the Midwest — a rancher from Paris, Mo., shared on Smith's Facebook page that he had 27 sets of triplets and more coming, and two sets of quadruplets — but unusual for ranchers in the Pacific Northwest.

Normally she has six to eight sets of triplets, she said.

"This year I had happy sheep, and between flowering ovaries, sticky uteruses and hot-firing rams, everything to conceive seemed to go through to gesta-



Sarah Smith, pictured in 2019, has been a WSU Extension agent for 26 years. She works and raises sheep in Moses Lake, Wash. This year her ewes gave birth to 22 different sets of triplets — so far. (Matthew Weaver/Capital Press)

tion," Smith said. "I have to be thankful that the sheep were what I manage for, to be productive and efficient. They just were a little too efficient. We can try to be C students next year, A++ is a little much."

Ordinarily, her ideal scenario is a more like a set of twins.

"It's just easy on the ewe, it's easy on me," she said. Triplets, "that's not easy on

a ewe."

Managing the triplets

Smith decided to pull one triplet off of each ewe and bottle feed the third as a "bummer lamb," presumably so-called industry-wide because it bums milk.

Milk replacer costs about \$80 per bag, and each lamb gets about one bag before they're weaned at 60 days. Smith uses 100% milk that is

animal protein.

The lambs are fed four times a day.

Lambs need a dry, clean dwelling. Smith is keeping the triplets arranged in groups of about four or so, by age and size, and keeping track of them, at first with different wool-overs and then various symbols spray-panted on their back: an orange zigzag group, a straight-line orange group, green zigzag group and no stripes.

"I have to give a lot of credit to my guard dog, Berq," she said. "That guy — he sits and watches them, but he also cleans up the backends. I think he's their safeguard."

Smith's parents keep a ranch in Dusty, Wash. She will send the first group of weaned lambs there this weekend, to receive show lamb feed. Her plan is to have good thriving lambs for youth in May.

"I think I'm pretty good;

See TRIPLETS, Page A14

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Vet says live horse surgeries give students necessary skills

By **Matthew Weaver**
Capital Press

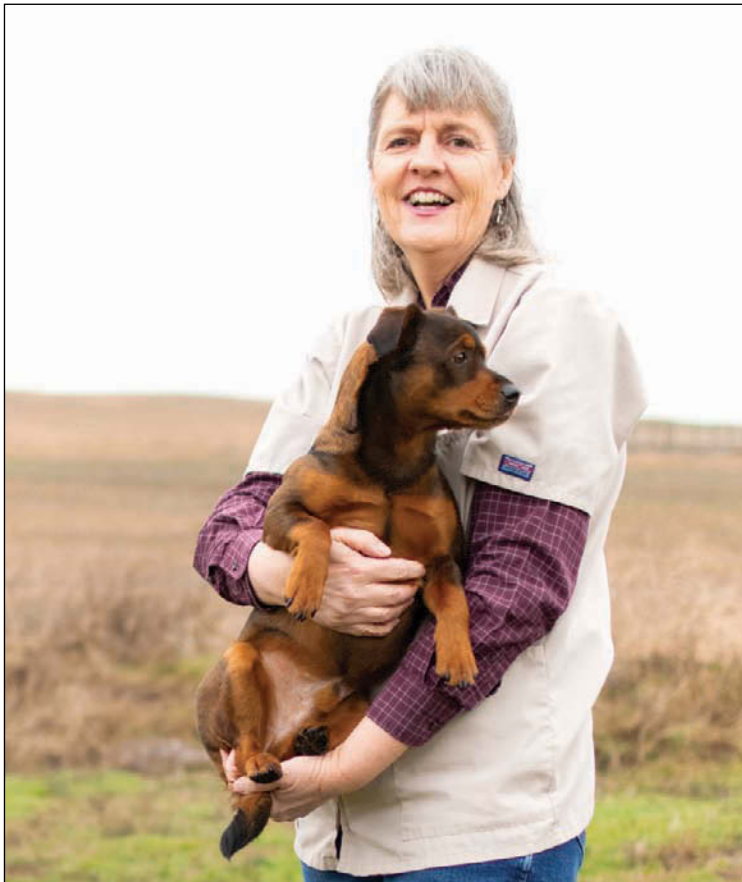
Washington State University's decision to stop horse surgery labs, using horses that are euthanized after practice operations, takes away a necessary skill from future large animal veterinarians, a longtime Eastern Washington vet says.

"We have students that need an education," Lamont, Wash., Dr. Jill Swannack said. "Part of that education is handling live tissue. I personally hate to see that taken away from them, because they don't have anywhere else to get that education."

WSU's College of Veterinary Medicine canceled the equine portion of its Veterinary Medicine 573 course due to threats following a campaign by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and "compassionate veterinarian group" Our Honor to stop the practice. The college said it had already planned to stop the practice at the end of the spring semester.

So-called "terminal operations" are not prohibited by the American Veterinary Medical Association or the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges.

"Whenever possible, animals should not be euthanized solely for educational purposes..." the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges guidelines for the use of cadavers in veterinary education state. "Institutions



Dr. Jill Swannack, Lamont, Wash., veterinarian and rancher, says Washington State University's decision to stop using live horses in a surgery course denies future large animal veterinarians necessary skills. (Courtesy Dr. Jill Swannack)

using live animals in teaching should implement a policy for reviewing the use of animals in education; identifying alternatives to animal use where appropriate."

PETA and other animal advocacy groups oppose terminal operations.

"(PETA's) goals are, what? We don't eat animals, we don't do research on animals. We have no animals, we have no pets. Where that line shifts to, I guess it's anybody's guess," Swannack said. "But these students are going to school to become animal doctors."

Swannack wonders whether the university has turned the threats over to law

enforcement.

"If they're getting these threatening and horrible letters and emails, why aren't we turning this over to, like, Homeland Security?" Swannack asked. "This is domestic terrorism."

The threats were forwarded to law enforcement, said Pam Scott, WSU vice president of system communications and strategy. Scott declined to comment further.

Surgery labs

In surgery labs, students typically perform common surgeries that they would do in their practice, such as cutting and repairing a ten-

don, or an abdominal exploratory procedure, so that students would know how to go through a wall of the abdomen, and how to repair it.

"What things should feel like when they're alive," Swannack said. "We can't get the same sensation from anything deceased. Nothing feels the same. There are all these skills that you need coming out as a veterinarian that require a live animal surgery."

Swannack used sheep in labs when she was a student. She graduated in 1991.

Animals are euthanized following the surgeries, Swannack said. When she was in school, students would perform one simple surgery to recover the animal and observe its healing, and then one surgery in which the animal would not recover.

"There's value in recovering them, in that we need to learn what recovery from anesthesia looks like," Swannack said. "But there's also

value in euthanizing, in that it lets us, say, fix broken bones, open a chest or do things that are maybe more invasive and painful that that animal doesn't then have to recover from."

For the sheep labs, the animals would likely have been eaten anyhow, and euthanized "one way or another," she said.

"I could probably argue the same with these horses," she said. "None of us are living forever. And so if they can be used for education, that to me is a noble purpose."

Move to models

Swannack believes it was WSU College of Veterinary Medicine Dean Dori Borjesson's plan all along to discontinue the labs. She believes Borjesson is pushing using fewer animals in educating students and using more models.

WSU students are no lon-

See **SURGERIES**, Page A14

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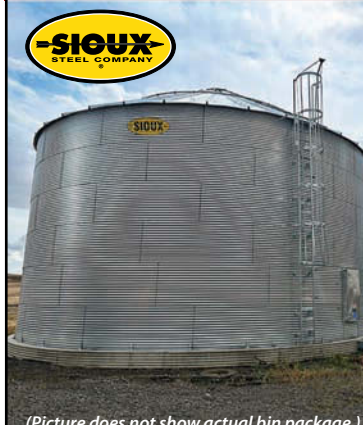
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TRIPLETS:

continued from A12

my parents are way better than I am, so they're in good hands," she said.

'Lamb after lamb after lamb'

Smith hasn't had time to calculate final lamb numbers yet. So far, all but two have survived. She expects to wind up at about 200%

for this year's lamb crop, with more than 100 lambs. Several more ewes are still slated to lamb this spring.

Almost all club lambs were born during a 20-day period in early February.

The night of WSU's Swine Information Day, Feb. 6, eight ewes gave birth, including six sets of triplets.

"I remember going to Swine Day, coming back that night and never going to bed," Smith said. "It was

just lamb after lamb after lamb ... At this point, you're running on adrenaline and no sleep. You kind of think, 'I could be on vacation in the Bahamas right now.' My addiction is sheep, and so at that point, it wasn't about money and stuff, it was just like, 'I have little lives here.'"

In addition to production and profitability, animal care and animal welfare are important for ranchers,

Smith said.

"I think at eight or nine, I almost had a moment of, 'What am I going to do?'" she said. "By the time I hit Number 13, I was like, 'This is my reality. Get it together and let's figure out a system.'

"Mother Nature will hassle you, she will reward you," Smith added. "Just when you think you've got this, she's like, 'Yeah, no – not so fast.'"

SURGERIES:

continued from A13

surger using cadavers for dissections in their first year. They can get pre-dissected cadavers out of freezer storage to look over, Swannack said.

In one instance, the cadaver had

not been put back together correctly and had two right lungs, she said.

"That's the beginning of our surgery skills," Swannack said. "We're going to create this whole line of doctors that don't know how to do surgery ... Your patients on the private side are at a higher risk because (vets) are slow and unsure. They're missing

a skillset."

Swannack recently had a rescue facility contact her to operate on an ear tumor because their clinic had never done it before and wasn't willing to try.

She successfully assisted another client on a cow's uterine prolapse who had contacted a recent graduate

"who quoted a relatively high price and a very, very poor outcome."

"We're creating these people that aren't willing to try," she said. "How do we learn things if we don't try?"

It means fewer large animal vet students come to Washington for their training, instead attending other colleges with better programs, she said.

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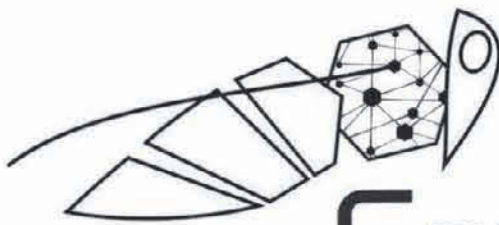


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- '14 CASE IH 8230, 1924 Sep Hours, 520/85R42 Duals, 600/65RS8 Rears, Chopper, GPS **\$129,900**
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- '13 CaseIH 8230, PowerPlus CVT Drive, Ext Wear Rotor, Cross Auger Control, Fine Cut Chopper, Spreader, Weather Bank Radio, Diff Lock, 600/65R28 Steering Tires, Yield & Moisture Logging **\$145,900**

- '13 CaseIH 8230, PowerPlus CVT Drive, Ext Wear Rotor, Cross Auger Control, Fine Cut Chopper, Spreader, Weather Bank Radio, Diff Lock, 600/65R28 Steering Tires, Yield & Moisture Logging **\$145,900**
- '25 CASE IH 8260, 249 Sep Hrs, Hillco Leveler, Harvest Command Automation w/Camera, Power+ CVT Drive, Yield Monitor, Lux Cab w/ Leather Seat, Pro 1200 Large Color Touch Screen, Telematics, Ext Wear Rotor w/Spikes, 50' Unloading Auger **\$708,500**
- 25 CASE IH 9260, Harvest Command Automation w/Camera, Power+ CVT Drive, Yield Monitor, Luxury Cab w/Leather Seat, Pro1200 Large Color Touch Screen, Independent Cross Auger Control **\$729,500**
- 353 Sep Hrs **\$714,500**
- 21 CASE IH 9250, 1573 HRS Sep Hrs, Luxury Cab, AM/FM/BT Radio, Pro 700, Large Color Touch Screen, Autoguidance Nav Controller, Hillco Lvlr, Command Automation, Power+ CVT Drive w/Feedrate, Yield Monitor, Harvest Command w/Cameras, Auto Cleaning Fan, Block Heater, Independent Cross Auger Control, Diff Lock **\$439,900**
- 21 CASE IH 8250, 1209 Sep Hrs, Hillside, Lux Cab, Autoguidance, Yield Monitor, HVSTC w/Camera, PowerPlus CVT Drive w/Feedrate, 40' Auger w/ Pivoting Spout, Upper Cross Auger Control, Large Color Touch Screen, Diff Lock, 650/65R38 Duals **\$524,900**

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The power of the FFA blue corduroy jacket

By Kyle Odegard
Capital Press

REDMOND, Ore. — The FFA jacket — worn by roughly 2,500 students every March at the Oregon FFA State Convention — is more than just an article of clothing.

Teenagers said the blue corduroy jacket provides confidence and a sense of belonging, as well as a bit of pressure to represent their communities properly.

After all, where they're from is stitched on the back in corn gold, right below the FFA emblem.

The jacket somehow signifies both the past and the future, tradition and progress.

Jackets instill confidence and community

For some, donning the FFA jacket is like wearing a suit of armor.

"As soon as you put that jacket on, you feel like you can take on anything," said James Johnson, a senior and Harrisburg FFA chapter president.

Johnson runs cross country and track for the Eagles, but he said those uniforms don't instill the same sense of self-assurance and poise.

Jaxon Ford, a senior and Baker chapter president, said the jacket represents leadership, personal growth and career success.

"When I was younger, it felt like a superhero cos-



Students dance to the song "Church Clap" during the 2026 Oregon FFA State Convention on March 21 in Redmond, Ore. Students said wearing the FFA jacket provides a boost of confidence and a feeling of belonging. (Kyle Odegard/Capital Press)

tume, but it's changed me so much. Now I always feel like that," he added.

Tyler Greene, a junior from Banks, Ore., said FFA jackets create community — and with more than 1 million members across the U.S., that can be a big community.

"When you're in a room full of everyone wearing the same thing, you're all united," he said.

Students also are on the same even footing, Greene added.

Genevieve Van Houten, a freshman at Weston-McEwen High School in Athena, Ore., signed an FFA jacket display at the Grange Co-op booth at the con-

vention's Career & Education Expo before posing for goofy photos with friends.

Van Houten felt accomplished when she first put on her jacket because she

always dreamed of being in FFA.

"I heard how fun it was," she added.

The history behind the FFA jacket

The FFA jacket stems from a chance encounter, according to the National FFA Organization.

In 1933, five years after FFA formed, advisor Gus Linter saw a blue corduroy jacket in a hardware store window in Fredericktown, Ohio.

He connected with the jacket supplier to have his chapter's name stitched on the back with gold thread.

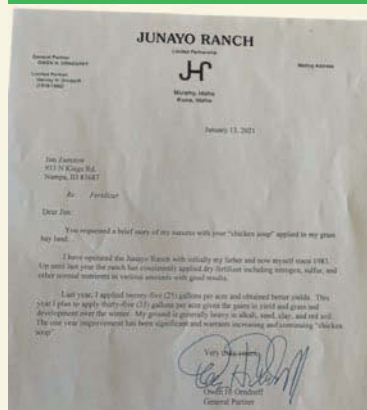
The Fredericktown chapter wore their jackets to the 1933 National FFA Convention and they were so popular they became part of the organization's offi-

See JACKET, Page B4

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JACKET:

continued from B3

cial attire.

Universal Lettering Company in Van Wert, Ohio, a business descended from the original supplier, continues to provide and stitch all FFA jackets.

The jackets have changed, with a zipper instead of the original snaps, as well as better pockets and an inside pocket.

Today, more than 90,000 jackets are sold to members across the country each year, said Kristy Meyer, National FFA Organization communications manager.

For members only and other jacket rules

According to organization rules, jackets should be worn by members only, with the jacket zipper fastened to the top, the collar turned down and the cuffs buttoned.

FFA members can earn pins for jackets, but should never wear more than three medals on the front — their highest degree, highest office held and highest award.

Mia Leal, an Echo High School senior, had medals on the outside of her jacket, but attached earlier awards — her Greenhand Degree



Peyton Larson (from left), Deegan Tuning and Hunter Lewis of the Yamhill-Carlton FFA chapter pose for a photo. Larson, a freshman, said she always dreamed of being in FFA so it felt great to put on her jacket for the first time. (Kyle Odegard, Capital Press)

and her chapter secretary pin — on the inside, hidden from view but close to her heart.

“When I put my jacket on for the first time, I was opening a new chapter in my life because I’ve never done anything like this before,” she said.

Leal said the jacket makes her speak better in public, among other positive impacts.

Financial assistance available for jackets

Some members have multiple jackets, getting new jackets for leadership roles with their district or state.

Others have only one, borrow from the chapter or wear a family

member’s jacket.

The jackets cost \$65 for standard models, or \$90 for tailored versions, though FFA members can get financial assistance.

The National FFA Organization has gifted nearly 21,000 jackets through the Give the Gift of Blue program since 2014, Meyer said.

More than \$2 million has been donated to the program since its inception.

Locally, alumni, community organizations and businesses often donate funding for jackets, said FFA chapter advisors.

Bailey Garcia, a sophomore from Ontario, Ore., received her

See JACKET, Page B5



Kendall Holcomb from Elkton, Ore., outgoing Oregon FFA state reporter, takes off her jacket and holds it up to cheers from the crowd in her last official act at the 2026 Oregon FFA State Convention in Redmond, Ore. The blue corduroy jacket is a symbol of the student organization,



Weston-McEwen FFA members Synoma Fitzsimmons, Kinsley Dennis, Lillian Waldher, Genevieve Van Houten and Penelopy Rawlins pose for a goofy photo at the Grange Co-op booth at the 2026 Oregon FFA State Convention on March 21 in Redmond, Ore. The booth included a FFA jacket display that attendees could sign. (Kyle Odegard/Capital Press)

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JACKET:

continued from B4

jacket through the Gift of Blue.

"I tried it on in the classroom and I started crying, because I've never won anything like that," she said.

She recalled being overwhelmed with happiness and her advisor telling her, "Welcome to the family."

No-names and alumni jackets

Every chapter has "no-name" jackets or those donated by alumni that students can borrow.

Keeghan Gittins, a Sweet Home High School senior, has been with FFA for about a year and wore a no-name jacket. He couldn't afford his own but said it wasn't a big deal.

"Everything is inclusive in FFA. ... You're all treated like family. You all have a blue jacket," he said.

Many jackets donated by alumni still have the names of their original owners on the right chest.

Some alumni jackets look slightly off due to lighter colored-fabric or more orangish lettering from previous versions.

Such was the case with Bruno Cuadrado, a junior with the Paisley FFA chapter.

The Spanish foreign exchange student wore the old jacket of Matt Withers. He said he'd never met Withers but understood he was important to the



Jaysee Ward, a sophomore with the Ontario FFA chapter, signs a jacket display at the Grange Co-op booth. She said she feels more confident and professional wearing her FFA jacket.

community.

Cuadrado, who hails from the middle of Madrid, population 3.5 million, said he has learned about agriculture and improved his public speaking and social skills through FFA.

"I think it's pretty cool, honestly," he said.

At the past two state conventions, Harrisburg FFA advisor Kayla Reber saw her old jacket from Oregon's Oakland FFA chapter being worn.

"It makes me glad I donated it so someone else can experience that. It's kind of cool to see it live on," she added.

A thin line between love and hate

Reber said she loved her jacket, but also hated it because it didn't fit well. Her father made her size it up so she'd grow into the garment, which never happened.

Some students said they've outgrown their jackets, which are now too short for their

arms or torsos.

Greene and Brayden Hamel, a Banks senior, said the FFA jacket isn't exactly the most functional piece of clothing with Oregon's wide range of weather.

The jacket doesn't provide enough warmth during cool weather and is too hot during scorching days.

Hamel added that he's become more comfortable in his jacket, however.

With time comes perspective about jackets

While some members donate their jackets, others tuck them away in the back of closets or attics, pulling them out for special occasions, or putting them back into use for a relative or family friend.

In October, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins attended the National FFA Convention and wore her jacket from being a Texas FFA state officer in 1990.

"Decades later the jacket still fits — a little faded in color but carrying every single memory," she wrote on social media in February, during National FFA Week.

Kjer Kizer, Oregon FFA CEO, remembered the incredible feeling of zipping up her first jacket and the "pure joy" of receiving her "association" jacket after being elected as a state officer.

"While I loved wearing my own, watching my children zip up their jackets for the first time was even more exciting," Kizer said.

"I truly love the legacy it represents," she added.



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WSU turfgrass breeder shares successes amid budget challenges

By **Matthew Weaver**
Capital Press

Michael Neff, turfgrass breeder at Washington State University, was recently named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"It's a surprise and an amazing honor," Neff told Capital Press.

Three current AAAS fellows have to nominate a candidate and list their most significant contributions to their field, he said.

Neff believes his most significant contributions include the discovery that at least 10 different genes in the plant arabidopsis, or thale cress, can inactivate the hormones brassinosteroids, in various pathways.

That led to identifying other ways hormones and responses to light interact to control a

plant's development.

Neff's study is now cited in major textbooks used to teach plant physiology to college students and graduate students.

Mutations have been made to impact seed size and seedling emergence in camelina and canola, Neff said.

"I like that in my work, I've been able to do fundamental research of just learning how plants work and then asking the question, 'Can we use that information in a way to inform through biotechnology how crops grow and develop?'" Neff said. "We don't know where we'll go yet next, but it's been a lot of fun and allowing luck to happen."

Good news

It's the latest in a series of recent accomplishments for Neff.

In January he was named



Washington Turfgrass Seed Commission Professor Michael Neff has been at Washington State University for nearly 20 years. Neff was recently named a fellow in the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the latest in a series of successes in his turfgrass breeding program. (Courtesy Washington State University)

the Washington Turfgrass Seed Commission Professor, a position endowed by the industry.

As breeder, Neff focuses on seed germination, flowering and yield. Neff's program includes Kentucky bluegrass — 90% of the world's seed is produced in the Inland Northwest — as well as grasses for forage, land reclamation and ornamental use.

In February he appeared on an episode of the PBS TV series "Ask This Old House" talking about grass seed breeding, harvesting and cleaning.

His turf science class is helping a community in Sequim, Wash., maintain a grass air strip.

Neff believes it's a result of telling "good stories" about turfgrass work at WSU.

"I'm enthusiastic, I love talking about what we do," he said. "I think that's infectious; people like hearing and being part of those stories."

Funding

Amid state budget cut and international trade challenges, Neff points to a "significant loss of funding" for his program.

"My program is getting smaller," he said.

When WSU built the Grass Breeding and Ecology Farm in 2019, Neff had five Ph.D. students, two master's degree students, two postdoctoral students, two technicians and five undergraduate students.

As students graduate, he's not refilling their positions. He expects to have one master's student, one postdoctoral student and one technician.

"That is a huge change from five or six years ago," he said. "We're still doing the breeding, we're still actively working on getting the varieties out."

Neff is working on two new no-burn turfgrass varieties and has a pipeline of low-vernalization material, to solve the long-term problem of dealing with warmer winters.

"We're continuing to do the work as best as we can, but our burn rate is faster right now than our funding income," Neff said.

He's talking with industry about potential funding opportunities.

"We are working on exploring fundamental questions and at the same time directly working on the challenges that we and farmers are trying to anticipate will happen in the future," Neff said.

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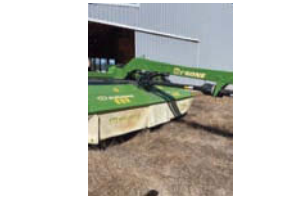
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Washington Farm Bureau: 'Millionaire tax' to pinch ag

By Don Jenkins
Capital Press

Washington's new "millionaire's tax" will hit farmers who sell equipment and agricultural buildings, according to the Washington Farm Bureau.

Few farmers make \$1 million a year, but they could exceed that threshold when liquidating property, such as tractors or storage bins, according to the Farm Bureau's analysis.

"The percentage of farmers who make \$1 million are probably less than 1% nationally," Farm Bureau government relations director Breanne Elsey said. "But we did find the millionaire's tax will have a significant effect on agriculture despite that."

Gov. Bob Ferguson signed the income tax bill at a ceremony March 30 in Olympia. The 9.9% tax on adjusted gross income over \$1 million takes effect Jan. 1, 2028, with the first taxes due in 2029.

The tax largely will mirror the federal tax code. In language writ-



Washington Gov. Bob Ferguson signs an income tax bill March 30 in Olympia. The tax will hit retiring farmers liquidating their equipment, according to the Washington Farm Bureau. (Courtesy State of Washington)

ten for tax accountants and lawyers, the IRS sets rules that count the disposal of property as income.

The tax could hit farmers who are selling property to finance

retirement, or selling old equipment to buy new equipment, Elsey said. It also could drive farmers to seek the protection of bankruptcy, she said.

The income tax caused the most bitter fight of the recently completed 60-day session. The tax will require a state-level internal revenue service. The Department of Revenue plans to hire more than 300 people.

Elsey said she expects the tax to hit farmers in unpredictable ways.

"I fully believe we will uncover other issues," she said. "There's no way you could fully analyze the impacts to one of the biggest industries in the state in a two-month

period."

Elsey said she anticipates lawmakers will be open to refining the tax to avoid hitting farmers. "I don't think the Legislature has an intent to hurt farmers," Elsey said. "I think they want to work with us."

Democrats are counting on the state Supreme Court to reverse precedent and uphold the tax. The high court ruled in 1933 that a progressive state income tax violated the state constitution.

"With this bill, we're going to begin to right a historic wrong that has plagued our state for nearly 100 years and made our tax system one of the worst and most regressive in the entire country," said Senate

Majority Leader Jamie Pedersen, D-Seattle.

The Farm Bureau took a leading role in challenging the state's capital gains tax. The Farm Bureau argued it was an unconstitutional tax on income, citing the 1933 precedent.

The Supreme Court didn't overturn the 1933 precedent, but it ruled the capital gains tax didn't tax income. Rather, it was a tax on financial transactions, such as the act of selling stock, the court found.

The Farm Bureau has not decided whether it will challenge the income tax, Elsey said. "I think we need to see what the impacts are before we make that determination," she said.

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Wilco launches Ag Forever campaign to protect farmland

Capital Press

Wilco is partnering with organizations to help project agricultural land for future generations with its 2026 Ag Forever campaign in April.

Customers can round up their purchase price at the register to donate to the Oregon Agricultural Trust in Oregon, the Washington Farmland Trust in Washington, and the California Rangeland Trust and California Farmland Trust in California.

Wilco will match every dollar donated up to \$25,000 throughout April.

Donations can also be made online at farmstore.com/for-ag.

"The work of these organizations to protect agricultural land and keep it in production is needed now more than ever," said John Bowersox, Wilco CEO.

"Supporting this initiative aligns with Wilco's purpose to strengthen rural and agricultural lifestyles and we are excited to participate as the lead sponsor," he added, in a



Suzi Marshall folds jeans at Wilco's store in Salem, Ore., in this spring 2024 file photo. The farm store chain is partnering with the Oregon Agricultural Trust and other organizations to help protect farmland with its Ag Forever campaign. (Kyle Odegard, Capital Press)

news release.

OAT aims to raise \$1.5 million

The Oregon Agricultural Trust said its Ag Forever Fund will be used as a flexible, rapid response resource to protect ag lands when time and funding are critical.

The fund can provide capital to complete conservation easements or acquire land outright while long-term protection is secured. It can also meet the required match

for grants and cover essential costs when landowners donate easements.

"This fund ensures we don't lose irreplaceable farmland simply because the timing or funding don't line up. And Wilco's partnership is a huge step toward meeting our goal," said Nellie McAdams, Oregon Agricultural Trust executive director, in a news release.

OAT aims to raise \$1.5 million in the first year of the campaign, enabling the

organization to support three to five high-priority projects and protect up to 1,500 acres.

These include projects such as a first generation ranch on Oregon's northern coast, a multigenerational ranch in Lake County, and a small vegetable farm in the Willamette Valley.

Though Wilco's Ag Forever campaign runs through April, OAT's Ag Forever Fund will continue accepting donations throughout the year.

New Oregon store

Wilco's newest store in Aloha, Ore., will open on March 31 and marks the cooperative's 27th location.

Grand opening events are scheduled for April 2-5.

The new store, at 17675 S.W. Farmington Road, will create 30 jobs and support community initiatives, including partnerships with FFA and sponsorships of local community gardens and dog parks.

"This location represents an important step in our growth within the region," Bowersox said.

A Keizer, Ore., location that is part of Bi-Mart's Cascade Farm and Outdoor chain is set to become Wilco's 28th location in 2027.

Bi-Mart has announced plans to close its five-store Cascade chain this spring.

About a decade ago, Wilco had 15 stores in Oregon, Washington and California.

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Soybean, corn farmers welcome higher renewable fuel standard, emergency E15 waiver

By **Matthew Weaver**
Capital Press

U.S. corn and soybean leaders welcomed moves by the White House and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to boost domestic production and demand for farmers.

President Donald Trump announced that the EPA has finalized the Renewable Fuels Standard "Set 2" final rule.

"Set 2" establishes the renewable fuel volume requirements for 2026 and 2027 at the highest levels in the program's 20-year history, according to the EPA.

To meet "historic" 2026 and 2027 volume levels, EPA estimates that biodiesel and renewable diesel production and use will need to increase by over 60% compared to 2025 volumes.

"This in particular will drive renewed demand for American soybean producers," EPA stated in a press release. "EPA estimates that the rule will generate over \$10 billion for rural economies and create over 100,000 new jobs in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors."

"With President Trump and Administrator Zeldin's leadership, these historically high volumes are expected to create a \$3 to \$4 billion dollar increase in net farm income," U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins stated in the release. "The Renewable Fuel Standard Set 2 Rule will create a \$31 billion dollar value for American corn and soybean oil for biofuel production in 2026, which is \$2 billion more than in 2025. Our farmers are stepping up

to grow American energy dominance."

"U.S. soybean farmers needed a win to boost domestic markets this year, and President Trump, (EPA) Administrator Zeldin, and Secretary Rollins delivered in a big way," Scott Metzger, president of the American Soybean Association, stated in a press release. "The 2026-2027 renewable volume obligations will increase soybean oil use, boost U.S. soybean processing, and grow domestic biofuel markets for our crop. ASA and our soybean farmer members applaud the Trump Administration for getting this tremendous rule across the finish line."

Emergency fuel waiver

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has issued a temporary emergency fuel waiver to allow nationwide sales of E15, gasoline blended with 15% ethanol, and removing all federal impediments to selling E10, gasoline blended with 10% ethanol. The waiver is effective May 1.

Roughly 30% of field corn goes into fuel ethanol each year, according to the National Corn Growers Association. Ethanol is the second-largest customer for

U.S. corn.

The emergency fuel waiver will temporarily waive summer low volatility requirements and blending limitations for gasoline to provide additional flexibility to the fuel marketplace, EPA said in a press release.

"EPA is working with our federal partners to reduce unnecessary costs and uncertainty and ensure that gas prices remain affordable for all Americans through the summer," EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin stated. "This emergency action will provide American families with relief by increasing fuel supply and consumer choice."

Calls for E15 year-round

Rollins and other agricultural industry members called for year-round E15 availability.

"At a time of increasing global uncertainty, E15 helps lower costs at the pump while creating reliable markets for farmers," Rob Larew, president of the National Farmers Union, stated in a press release. "However, this remains a temporary fix. It's past time for Congress to deliver common-sense legislation that allows for the year-round, nationwide sale of E15."

The farmers union has long advocated for year-round access to E15 and the expansion of higher ethanol blends, such as E30.

Corn growers association president Jed Bower, an Ohio farmer, estimated that drivers save 25 cents a gallon on average with E15.

"This development will not only help America's corn growers who are doing their best to navigate tough economic times, but also it will save drivers money at the pump," Bower stated. "This development is no substitute for action that would allow for the permanent, year-round sale of E15. We call on Congress to heed the calls from President Trump and our congressional allies and immediately pass E15 legislation."

"... The waiver is strictly a bandage, and we need Congress to provide a permanent fix with passage of nationwide, year-round E15," Iowa Corn Growers Association president Mark Mueller stated in a press release from his organization. "Corn farmers need increased domestic demand, and consumers need relief at the pump. The time is now for Congress to get this issue across the finish line."

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USDA rolls out 'Product of USA' awareness campaign

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

The USDA launched a campaign to publicize the new standard for labeling meat, poultry and eggs a "Product of U.S.A.," while cattlemen's groups continued to call for a beefier rule.

Only products from animals born, raised and processed in the U.S. can be labeled a U.S. product. Previously, products from animals processed in the U.S. but born and raised elsewhere could carry the label.

"It all has to happen in this country," Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said March 24. "No shortcuts. No exceptions. No confusion."

The labels will be voluntary. The U.S. Cattlemen's Association said it will still push for the return of mandatory country-of-origin labels, but added that the voluntary rule was needed now.



The 'Product of USA' label is for meat, poultry and egg products from animals born, raised and processed in the U.S. (Courtesy USDA)

"It's a clear, common-sense standard that celebrates each farmer and rancher that is behind a 'Product of USA' label," cattlemen's association President James Tupper said in a statement.

To coincide with National Agriculture Day, the USDA released a 53-second video extolling the standard. The video featured cattle in the mist, five rodeo stars, a flag-waving cowboy, Rollins and Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

A USDA website promoting the rule is headed, "Tastes Like Freedom." The USDA said it wants producers and consumers to be aware of what the label means.

The Biden administration adopted the rule in 2024. Canadian and Mexican officials had complained the rule would discriminate against their animals slaughtered in the U.S. Poultry producers sought an exemption for chicks hatched in Canada, but transported into the U.S.

within 48 hours.

The Biden USDA delayed implementing the rule to give processors time to prepare, but held firm on requiring animals to spend their entire lives in the U.S.

Multi-ingredient meat, poultry and egg products also must be processed in the U.S. All ingredients except spices and flavorings must be from the U.S.

Processors will not need to get USDA approval to apply Product of USA labels, though the USDA says they must be prepared to document their claims and sign statements attesting the claims are true.

Loophole closed

The rule will close a loophole that allowed imported beef to be labeled a U.S. product, R-CALF USA said in a statement.

"This is a positive step in advancing our goal of empowering consumers to support American's

beef supply chain through their purchasing decisions," R-CALF CEO Bill Bullard said.

Congress should follow up by passing legislation to mandate country-of-origin labeling on all beef, he said.

The U.S. adopted mandatory labels in 2009, but repealed them in 2015 after a World Trade Organization arbitration panel ruled the labels discriminated against Canadian and Mexican beef and pork producers.

U.S. Rep. Harriet Hageman, R-Wyoming, has introduced a bill to reinstate mandatory labels, regardless of WTO rulings. U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-South Dakota, sponsors legislation to reinstate labels in compliance with WTO rules.

Some agricultural organizations are asking the U.S. trade representative to press for mandatory country-of-origin labels as it renegotiates the United States-Mexico-Canada trade agreement.

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USDA projects lowest wheat acreage since 1919

By Matthew Weaver
Capital Press

As USDA projects less corn and wheat and more soybeans planted this year in its annual prospective plantings report, market analysts don't expect much shift in prices.

All-wheat planted area for 2026 is estimated at 43.8 million acres, down 3% from 2025.

"If realized, this represents the lowest all-wheat planted area since records began in 1919," USDA states.

"Wheat's been losing acres to corn and beans for a long time," said Byron Behne, senior market analyst at Northwest Grain Growers in Walla Walla, Wash. "Nobody's really making money on anything right now, so nobody's trying to plant extra."

Soft white wheat traded at about \$6.30 per bushel on the Portland market.

Wheat prices were up about 8 or 9 cents per bushel, said Dan Steiner,



According to USDA, all-wheat planted area for 2026 is estimated at 43.8 million acres, down 3% from 2025. (Courtesy Washington State Department of Agriculture)

who retired from Morrow County Grain Growers in 2023 and now works as a market analyst in Boardman, Ore.

He believes that had more to do with poor moisture and lowered crop ratings in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas than

USDA's report.

"You've got some of the biggest wheat producers not rating really high," Steiner said.

The market more less discounted the report, Behne echoed.

"Southern Plains

See WHEAT, Page B13

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continued from B12

weather, the Iran War and energy prices are the dominant market movers right now," he said.

In the Pacific Northwest, the wheat is looking "really good," Steiner said.

"It's growing slow, it's doing extremely well," Steiner said. "I would rather have this kind of temperature and situation than for it to be in the 80s. We do not need this crop to run out of gas. Every day that we have 60s, 70s, even in the 50s, buys us another day until the next rain system comes through."

Some wheat acres in Nebraska will be taken out, while some acres, even in the Pacific Northwest, simply won't be planted, Steiner said.

"Snowfall is light enough and moisture is limited enough that there are going to be some irrigated acres that simply will be fallow this year," he said. "The idea that wheat acres are going to be low or maybe record low, yeah, I can totally buy into that. But the stocks are still very ample."

Ample supplies

"It's just numbers – there's not a lot of reality to these things, but they get a lot of attention," said Darin Newsom, Omaha, Neb., analyst. "What do the stocks tell us? As of March 1, the U.S. had 1.3 billion bushels of wheat on hand, most of it off-farm. That was 5% more than last year. As we look ahead, we're not going to run out of wheat any time soon. I don't care if it's the smallest acres since 1919 – who's going to buy U.S. wheat? Nobody, but it got played today, so markets

rallied."

Such reports are designed to generate trade, Newsom noted.

"If wheat numbers continue to come down, even if there's no more demand for them, even if we have ample supplies, because the numbers themselves that are posted continue to come down, yeah, the markets are going to rally," he said. "The bottom line is, wheat acres were reduced and the market reacted."

Winter wheat acres are already accounted for, he said. "Now we'll see what the weather does."

Higher fuel and fertilizer costs are more likely to be reflected in corn and soybean acreage than wheat, Newsom said. The winter wheat crop planted next fall is where an effect will be most likely, he added.

"Skyrocketing" input costs will likely be the biggest concern moving forward, Behne said.

"Wheat prices have come up a little bit, but I don't think it's enough to offset those other costs right now," he said.

Wheat numbers

The 2026 winter wheat planted area, at 32.4 million acres, is down 2% from the previous year, according to USDA's report.

About 23.1 million acres are hard red winter wheat, 5.79 million acres are soft red winter wheat and 3.54 million acres are white winter wheat.

Acreage expected to be planted to spring wheat for 2026 is estimated at 9.42 million acres, down 6% from the 2025 estimate. About 8.78 million acres are hard red spring wheat. Durum is expected to total 1.95 million acres,

down 11% from the previous year.

Corn and soybean numbers

Corn planting is estimated at 95.3 million acres, down 3% and 3.45 mil-

lion acres from last year. Planted acreage is expected to be down or unchanged in 37 of the 48 estimating states compared to last year, according to the report.

Soybean planting is esti-

mated at 84.7 million acres, up 4% from last year.

Planted acreage is up or unchanged in 20 of 29 estimating states compared to last year, according to the report.



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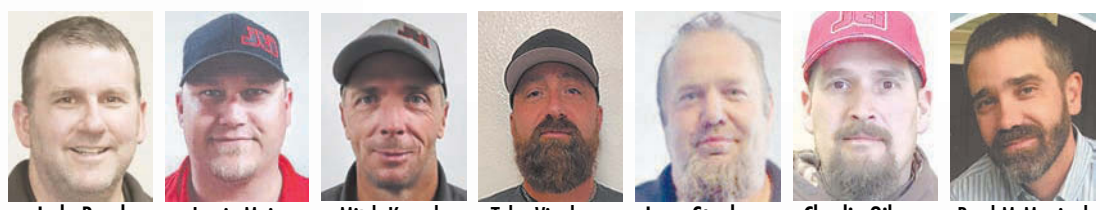
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Study links cattle feed efficiency to heat stress, grazing behavior

Capital Press

Rangeland cattle that inefficiently convert feed into body mass are more likely to struggle with heat stress than their efficient counterparts, research published recently in the Journal of Animal Science suggests.

Estimating forage consumption is more challenging on rangeland than in a feedlot, where ration sizes can be controlled. Researchers in the University of Idaho-led study quantified consumption on rangeland in part by adding a marker molecule to the rumen and tracking the marker's dissipation in manure over time. The researchers conducted the same analysis with cattle that were given the marker and fed a known amount of forage.

Cattle were classified as efficient or inefficient based on units of feed they consumed per the GrowSafe feed intake monitoring system.

"There are adaptations that cows take to adapt to their environment, and it's different between the efficient and inefficient cattle," Jim Sprinkle, UI Extension beef specialist and the study's principal author, said in a news release. "They adapted their grazing differently, and it's influenced by their physiology."

Efficient cattle took fuller advantage of forage throughout their range — including on steep slopes — during hot days, while inefficient cattle hunkered in lowlands and were more likely to trample riparian areas.

Researchers tracked 12 efficient and 12 inefficient two-year-old Hereford-Angus cross cows on rangeland at UI's Rinker Rock Creek Ranch in the state's central mountains. Researchers followed the cows over four days in June and four days in August.

As expected, inefficient cattle spent more time graz-

ing to meet their nutritional requirements, according to the release. In June, when forage was lush and easily digestible, efficient and inefficient cows grazed rugged terrain and slopes. In August, efficient cattle continued grazing hill-sides while inefficient cattle stuck to lowlands near shade and water.

"The efficient cows are more purposeful about how they graze," Sprinkle said. "They get in and get it done."

He and his colleagues discovered inefficient cows had significantly more undigested forage in their rumen than their efficient counterparts during August grazing, when vegetation was dry and full of less digestible fiber, according to UI. The inefficient cows were driven to keep eating to gain adequate nutrition and became overwhelmed by the combination of the summer heat and the heat generated inside of their rumen as forage accumulated.

Based on the study results, Sprinkle advises ranchers who graze on rugged terrain in the summer to consider selecting their replacement heifers with efficiency in mind.

"The majority of ranchers are not going to test their cows. However, you can buy bulls that have been tested for feed efficiency," he said. "You could do some selection over time to try to get some of those efficient cattle that presumably would use more of the rugged terrain."

Co-authors include UI Extension educators Carmen Willmore, John Hall and Melinda Ellison; Ronald Lewis of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Douglas Tolleson of Texas A&M AgriLife Research-Sonora; and David Jaramillo of USDA's U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center in Marshfield, Wis.

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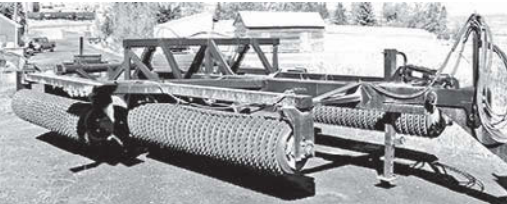


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USDA report shows higher honey value, but industry struggles continue

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Drought, high fuel and labor costs could make for tough 2026

U.S. honey production and yield per colony dropped in 2025 as a result of huge die-offs from varroa mites.

The value of production increased with better prices, though, according to the USDA.

Beekeepers said prices haven't kept pace with inflation and industry struggles continue.

"For most markets, the price is still below the actual cost of production," said Ryan Burris, California State Beekeepers Association president.

With fuel and labor costs increasing and drought forming in many regions, 2026 could be another rough year.

In dry conditions, bees don't find as much pollen or nectar, leading to greater feed expenses.

Diesel prices are concerning as beekeepers move colonies to catch different crops' bloom.

Many beekeepers can't charge more for honey, as



Beekeepers said honey prices haven't kept pace with inflation. "For most markets, the price is still below the actual cost of production," said Ryan Burris, California Beekeepers Association president. (Courtesy Washington State University)

they are price-takers like much of agriculture, said Tim Hiatt, Washington State Beekeepers Association legislative liaison and North Dakota Beekeepers Association vice president.

"For now, we're just going to bite the bullet and hope the Iran War doesn't last long so fuel and fertilizer prices go down," Hiatt added.

USDA figures disputed, but trends accurate

Beekeepers disputed USDA figures but said general trends were mostly accurate.

According to the USDA,

American beekeepers produced 116 million pounds of honey in 2025, down 14% from the previous year.

Yield per colony averaged 48 pounds, down 7%.

Experts said those dips were due to hive collapses connected to varroa mites.

"We had 60% winter loss throughout the United States, and it wasn't any one particular area. It was all over," said Joe Maresh, Oregon State Beekeepers Association past president.

Beekeepers split colonies, but the "make-up" hives weren't as healthy or productive, Maresh added.

Honey prices hit \$3.05 per

pound, up 27%.

The overall value of production climbed to \$353 million, up 9%.

Pollination income dipped 1% to \$225 million.

Hiatt said the industry is reliant on California's massive almond bloom, which attracts beekeepers from across the nation.

"Because demand is so high, what they are paying for California almonds is great," he added. "It subsidizes other pollination because it is so lucrative."

However, tree fruit growers might scale back on pollination even further this year, he added.

California led the West with value of production at \$28.3 million. That figure ranked second in the nation, behind North Dakota's \$58.3

million.

Washington's honey production was worth \$8.9 million, followed by Idaho at \$6.2 million and Oregon with \$4.9 million.

Not all 'doom and gloom'

There is some positive news for beekeepers.

Hiatt said there's more specialization into different marketing channels, with some beekeepers selling directly to consumers or smaller store chains to get better prices.

The industry has started efforts to promote domestic honey consumption, including new uses such as spicy

honey. Burris said many beekeepers are holding on to honey stocks and hoping for better prices.



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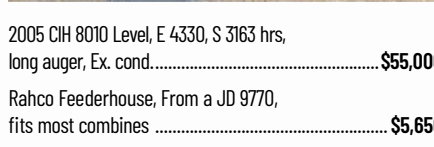
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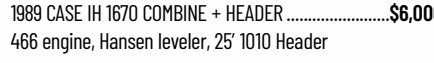
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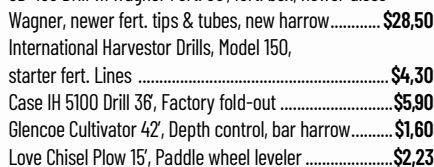
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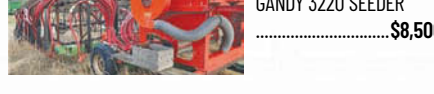
Case IH 2020 Header, 30' Dual drive, Flex head.....\$10,000
MAC DON 960 DRAPER HEADER 25?\$4,500



CASE IH 3016 GRASS/GRAIN HEADER\$15,000



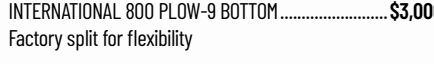
JD 455 Drill w/Wagner Fert. 35', fert. box, newer discs +
Wagner, newer fert. tips & tubes, new harrow\$28,500



International Harvester Drills, Model 150,
starter fert. Lines\$4,300



Case IH 5100 Drill 36, Factory fold-out\$5,900



Glencoe Cultivator 42, Depth control, bar harrow.....\$1,600



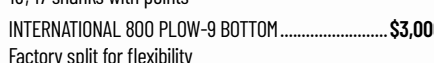
Love Chisel Plow 15', Paddle wheel leveler\$2,235



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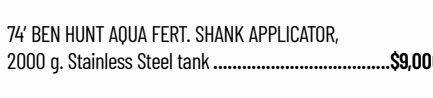
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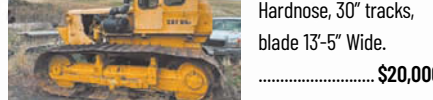
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FLEXI-COIL 67 XL SPRAYER
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CAT D5 CRAWLER,
Runs good, 13,000 hrs\$8,500

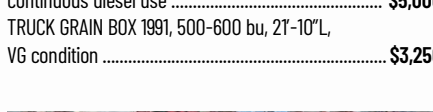


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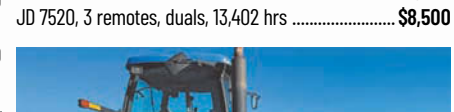
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Sometimes you're the windshield and
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I'm so broke,
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Landowner groups sign MOUs for Odessa groundwater replacement

By **Matthew Weaver**
Capital Press

Seven landowner groups have signed new memorandums of understanding with the East Columbia Basin Irrigation District to build systems replacing groundwater from declining wells with Columbia River surface water in the Odessa Subarea.

“This is encompassing almost all remaining acres left in the (Odessa Groundwater Replacement Program),” district manager Craig Simpson told Capital Press. “This is part of the solution, but until we build it, it’s just a plan, right?”

Nearly 192,000 acres are assessed and managed by 2,802 landowners within the federal Columbia Basin



Construction on the Columbia Basin Project. (Courtesy East Columbia Basin Irrigation District)

Project. The irrigation district is involved with the development of 87,000 acres associated with OGWRP, which aims to implement the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s Odessa Subarea Special Study, building the necessary

infrastructure for farmers to exchange valid, state-issued Odessa groundwater rights for Columbia Basin Project water.

The district began to deliver water on the EL 86.4 system in April 2025. The first system, the EL

47.5, was completed in 2021. Two more systems, the EL 84.7 (6,209.8 acres) and the EL 80.6 system (5,862 acres) are currently under construction for 2027 deliveries.

The irrigation district’s board of directors approved the Shrag, Wheeler Corridor, EL 54 and EL 56.5 delivery systems during their Feb. 4 board meeting, and the EL 4.8, EL 40.2 and EL 73.3 delivery systems during the March 4 meeting. The systems cover about 50 farming entities total.

The EL 40.2, EL 54 and EL 73.3 systems were “previously anticipated” on original maps, but had never reached the MOU stage, Simpson said.

“There’s still a lot of work – we’ve got to design it, and then we’ve got to come up with the funding, easements, all that good stuff,” Simpson said. “It’s a great step, but there’s still so much work left that I don’t want to claim too much of a victory yet.”

The systems will generally be shorter and smaller, so designs should theoretically go quicker, but there will potentially be seven in the works at the same time, Simpson said.

A limited number of people manage easement acquisition through the the bureau, he said.

“We may have designs

ready and even have funding available, and still be delayed,” he said.

Simpson hopes the systems will be complete in the next five to seven years.

“I don’t know if that’s realistic with the amount of easements we have to get,” he said. “Easements take a long time. Until we can find where the pipeline routes are, we can’t really start trying to obtain the easements.”

The seven systems cover about 28 miles total, Simpson said.

Landowners ‘invested heavily’

Simpson hopes for preliminary designs in about six months, to get a better understanding of the potential cost.

“It’s not inexpensive,” he said. “We’re talking hundreds of millions of dollars to complete.”

The state supplemental budget includes \$3.2 million to help with design of the remaining acres, but design for each system will cost about \$1.5 million, he said.

“A lot’s going to fall on the backs of the landowners to get this all started until we can get to the bond market or other funding sources,” Simpson said. “They’re going to be invested heavily to get these processes going.

See ODESSA, Page C3



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Washington cherry industry seeks bigger fruit

By **Kyle Odegard**
Capital Press

The USDA is accepting comments on a proposal to increase the minimum size requirements of most sweet cherry varieties in Central and Eastern Washington.

All sweet cherries in those areas would be covered except for "light sweet cherries" such as Rainier and Royal Anne.

The Washington Sweet Cherry Marketing Committee — administered by the Washington State Fruit Commission, which also oversees Northwest Cherry Growers — recommends new minimum size and pack requirement changes to the state's marketing order to maximize market returns and improve crop insurance practices.

Cherry size is typically referred to by row count, a measurement of how much fruit could fit in a box when lined up.



Northwest cherry trees are in full bloom. The Washington Sweet Cherry Marketing Committee is recommending a proposal to increase the minimum fruit size. In poor weather years, growers are forced to harvest small fruit with little value to qualify for crop insurance. (Courtesy Northwest Cherry Growers)

The proposal would remove the 12 row count (54/64 inch in diameter), and shift the minimum size to 11 1/2 row (57/64 inch).

New row sizes of 7 1/2 count (88/64 inch) and 7 count (92/64 inch) would be added.

The order would impact farms in Okanogan, Chelan, Kittitas, Yakima and Klickitat counties, as well as all 15 counties to the east.

Approximately 1,350 sweet cherry growers are in that production area and about 35 handlers would be subject to the regulation.

Small cherries less valuable

Federal paperwork states that according to the commission, 12 row fruit typically accounts for roughly 1-2% of the Washington sweet cherry market annually.

The market doesn't readily accept such smaller cherries, which usually command a lower price. However, they can create competition with larger fruit.

During difficult crop years with poor weather, growers are often required to pick and deliver their 12 row cherries to qualify for crop insurance coverage, even if doing so is not economically viable.

Crop insurance adjustors typically require farmers to pick all marketable fruit prior to submission of a claim — even though smaller size cherries have little value to the grower or handler.

The two new larger row counts will help the industry properly capitalize on those desirable sizes.

Currently, 8 row cherries and larger are marketed without further definition.

The new sizes will help farmers and handlers market large cherries in export markets at premium prices.

How to comment on cherry size proposal

The proposed rule was published in the Federal Register on March 9.

Written comments are due by April 8.

Comments should be submitted through www.Regulations.gov or mailed to the Docket Clerk, Market Development Division, Specialty Crops Program, Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA, 1400 Independence Ave. S.W., STOP 0237, Washington, D.C., 20250-0237.

Comments can also be sent to the Docket Clerk via email at MarketingOrderComment@usda.gov.

ODESSA:

continued from C2

We'll just navigate through everything it takes to build these things."

Some private landowner systems are also in the works. Simpson is aware of three that will cover several thousand acres.

'It needs to happen'

Did Simpson ever expect to get to this point?

"Early on, I thought, 'Yeah, this is just going to happen, it makes all the sense in the world, we need to do this,'" he said.

"And then reality set in; it's more difficult than you want to recognize when you start. I've always thought we'd get there. It's not gone the path or at the speed I thought it would. But I think it has to happen. We've got an aquifer out there that has problems and we've got a solution to it. Yeah, it's expensive and it's time-consuming but it needs to happen and I always have thought it will happen. We're capable of doing this. There was no real reason it couldn't get done."


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Blue states rip EPA's 'compliance first' approach to enforcement

By Don Jenkins
Capital Press

Democratic state attorneys general called on the Environmental Protection Agency to retract a memo instructing regulators to advise industries on how to comply with environmental laws before issuing penalties.

The 13 attorneys general claim the memo puts the interests of businesses over the environment and public health. Without strong enforcement, industries have little incentive to comply with laws, the attorneys general allege.

"This administration's approach gives polluters a tacit green light to break federal environmental laws," Washington Attorney General Nick Brown said in a statement.

The EPA's enforcement office issued the "compliance first" memo in December. The office's acting assistant administrator, Craig Pritzlaff, stated the EPA will take enforcement actions if needed, but encouraged quickly resolving problems with "two-way dialogues."

"We must act swiftly to limit actions from third parties who, through citizen suit litigation, unfairly impact policy through abusive litigation tactics," the memo stated.

In a letter March 18 to EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin, attorneys general complained the Trump EPA is settling more cases without issuing penalties. The letter cited research by Earthjustice, an environmental law firm.

The EPA said in an email the agency assessed nearly \$1.16 billion in fines, restitution and other court ordered relief in 2025. Other accomplishments included stopping more than 1.6 million pounds of illegal pesticides from entering the U.S., the agency said.

"Earthjustice is not a reliable source of information and is simply trying to

gin up donations from left-wing donors," the agency said.

Earthjustice based its report on EPA's own data, a spokeswoman said in an email. "Our credibility speaks for itself in the lawsuits we are bringing and winning against this administration," she said.

The EPA released a report in March claiming 2025 was a strong year for enforcement, despite a change in attitude. "The days of using EPA's enforcement to pursue overzealous prosecution and partisan agendas are over," Zeldin said.

The Pritzlaff memo instructed EPA regulators to tell industries how they can come into compliance. "Achieving timely compliance in the most efficient, most economical and swiftest means possible must be the primary focus of the negotiation and litigation strategy," the memo stated.

The attorneys general allege the EPA is masking the Trump administration's true intentions. In practice, the Pritzlaff memo curtails enforcement and delays compliance, they claim.

President Trump revealed his intentions by signing on his first day back in office an executive order titled, "Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation," according to the attorneys general.

They also cited a November 2024 opinion piece in The Wall Street Journal by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy. The entrepreneurs, connected with the Trump transition team, called government by unelected regulators "anti-democratic."

State attorneys general from California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, New York, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Rhode Island and Vermont also signed the letter.



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U.S. farm exports rise; trade deficit shrinks

By Don Jenkins
Capital Press

U.S. farm exports rose in February compared to the same month a year ago, while imports declined, lowering the agricultural trade deficit in line with USDA predictions.

Exports totaled \$14.7 billion, an 8% year-over-year increase, while imports fell 17% to \$15.7 billion, according to figures released April 2 by the USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service.

The trade deficit in farm goods in February was \$966.9 million, or 77% less than in February 2025.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said on X the shrinking trade gap validates President Trump's tariffs and trade deals.

"After decades of unfair trade practices, the president hit the reset button," she wrote. "Now, U.S. ag exports are rising, new markets are opening, and our farmers and ranchers are finally back at the center of policymaking."

USDA predicted last month the U.S. will end the 2026 fiscal year next September with a \$29 billion farm trade deficit, compared to \$43.7 billion deficit in fiscal year 2025. The U.S. last ran a farm trade surplus in fiscal year 2022.

Through the first four months of the current fiscal year, farm imports have surpassed exports by \$4.4 billion, compared to \$13.6 billion the previous year.

Year-over-year sales to most top foreign markets increased in February. Exports to Mexico were up

2% to \$2.36 billion, while exports to the European Union were up 17% to \$1.3 billion.

Exports to China were up 34% to \$1.7 billion. Sales to China, however, remained well below the \$3 billion exported in February 2024. Exports to Canada were down 3% to \$2.19 billion.

Soybean sales for the month rebounded to \$1.8 billion, or 40% higher than the year before, though still 43% below February 2024. Soybean sales to China for the month totaled \$1 billion.

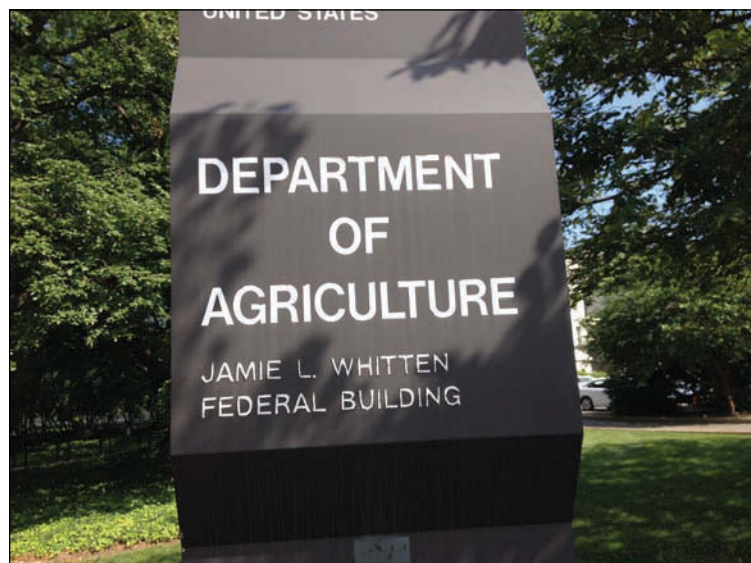
Year-over-year wheat exports were up 6%, dairy exports were up 11%, fresh fruit exports were up 13% and ethanol exports were up 50%.

Beef exports were down 9%, while beef imports were up 33%.

"For consumer affordability, unfortunately, we need these imports," R-CALF USA CEO Bill Bullard said. "Today's marketplace is unprecedented. We've never seen supplies so short and demand so high."

U.S. cattlemen are cashing in on high prices and will be reluctant to rebuild their herds until they are confident prices won't crash because of rising foreign imports, Bullard said.

To create that confidence, the U.S. should commit to lowering imports in three years, creating a supply void that U.S. ranchers could look forward to filling, he said. "It will take three years to have meaningful expansion in our industry," he said.



The USDA reports that in February year-over-year farm exports rose and the farm trade deficit shrank. (Capital Press file photo)




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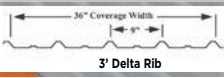
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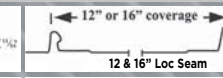
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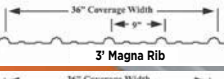
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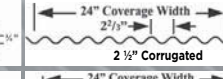
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Cheney FFA members give apple lessons to elementary schoolers

Capital Press

CHENEY, Wash. — Cheney, Wash., FFA members recently visited two local elementary schools to share information about apples.

The chapter visited Betz Elementary and Great Northern Elementary in February.

The chapter's F.A.R.M. For Kids team — Taylor Pettit, Gage O'Connor, and Amira Islam-Zwart —

planned lessons with three rotations: the life cycle of an apple, how to define apple varieties and a taste test and a version of the popular Apples to Apples card game, focused on fun facts about apples.

“Our Cheney FFA members that participated in these events had tons of fun, especially when they saw how excited the kids were to see them!” Cheney FFA president Taylor Pettit wrote in a press release.

The chapter presented 12 lessons overall and impacted about 815 students, Pettit wrote.

The chapter had previously revived its annual Ag Day at Cheney High School in October, inviting elementary school students from throughout the Cheney school district to learn about the area's agriculture, after pausing it during the COVID-19 pandemic.

That event included livestock exhibits from local

families and an apple cider station where kids could make their own apple cider with a real apple cider press.

“The students loved everything we had for them, but the livestock and the apple cider press was a really big hit,” Pettit stated. “Since our FFA chapter had done previous lessons about animals, we wanted to branch out and try something new, which ended up being apples since the apple cider station was really



Kids make their own apple cider using a real apple cider press during Ag Day at Cheney High School October 2025 in Cheney, Wash. The enthusiastic response during the event inspired Cheney FFA's F.A.R.M. For Kids team to put together lessons about apples for elementary school students in February. (Cheney FFA).

popular.”

The F.A.R.M. For Kids team will make a presentation about the event during Washington FFA's state convention in May.



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Scout touts Horse Heaven energy project to justices

By Don Jenkins
Capital Press

Scout Clean Energy claims in a court filing that the Horse Heaven wind and solar project would equal the output of a large coal or natural gas power plant, a disputed claim never examined by regulators.

With batteries, the 1,150-megawatt installation in Benton County, Wash., would supply power even when the wind isn't blowing and the sun isn't shining, the company stated in a brief to the Washington Supreme Court.

"At that scale, the project could replace a large fossil-fuel fired facility," the brief reads.

Benton County PUD manager Rick Dunn said Scout's project won't be an adequate substitute for a fossil fuel plant, even with batteries. Windmills, the project's largest part, likely will make little or no electricity on some winter days, he said.

"You can't get rid of the fossil fuel plant. What do you do on the coldest mornings?" Dunn said. "A wind farm can never replace the controllable capacity of a coal plant."

Scout has a permit to build on Horse Heaven hills in southeast Washington, but must, along with the state, defend the project at a Supreme Court hearing June 11.

The Yakama Nation, Benton County commissioners



Windmills turn in Central Washington. Scout Clean Energy claims its Horse Heaven wind and solar project in southeast Washington will equal a large coal or natural gas power plant. State officials did not evaluate the claim before Gov. Jay Inslee approved the project. (Don Jenkins/Capital Press)

and Tri-City CARES allege that then-Gov. Jay Inslee overstepped his authority in approving the project.

In a process that took several years, the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council studied potential impacts to views, noise, traffic, wildlife, agriculture, socioeconomics and tribal culture.

It didn't, however, evaluate the project's projected output of electricity or its projected output during peak hours, when energy planners say the Northwest is at risk of power shortages.

"We tried to get that data, and we were foreclosed from

doing that," Tri-City CARES attorney Richard Aramburu said.

"We wanted to talk about the need issue, the capacity issue," he said. "We really wanted to see if it was true that this project was going to justify all the damage it was doing."

At 1,150-megawatts, the

Horse Heaven project would have a larger maximum potential output than any of the state's natural gas plants. But the Western Power Pool estimates that windmills in Washington operate at only 5.5% of their potential during peak-demand hours in January, typically the coldest month of the year.

Scout declined to comment for this story. The company emphasized to the Supreme Court the project's maximum capacity and ability to supply power with batteries.

"That reliability is what makes the project useful to the local electrical grid," the company stated.

Utilities won't be able to count on Horse Heaven in the winter, Dunn said. The proj-

ect can be expected to generate more electricity in the spring, but that's when hydro power peaks, he said.

"What they're contributing to is an energy glut," Dunn said. "We don't need this wind farm in the Tri-Cities at all."

The project will span 72,000 acres of leased farmland. Washington is turning to carbon-free energy because of climate change, according to the Washington attorney general's office.

"The transition requires the development of clean energy facilities, such as wind and solar, on a scale that demands considerable space in rural areas," its brief states.

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Challenging season looms for Eastern Snake Plain pact

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

RAFT RIVER, Idaho — Lucas Spratling is setting up his 2026 crop rotations and on-farm practices as if it's 2027, when stricter water-rights administration takes effect in his area.

"I would say pretty much everyone in this valley has been preparing for it for years," he said. "We've known this is coming."

The 2026 crop season will be key in longtime

efforts to slow the decades-long decline of the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer.

A 2024 settlement agreement between groundwater pumpers and a coalition of seven surface water delivery entities with senior rights is succeeding halfway into its four-year term but faces an unusually low snowpack. The Idaho Department of Water Resources this year is bringing portions of the Big and Little Lost river basins into a rights administration area the legislature expanded in 2024, and next year will add the Raft River Basin.

In the Raft basin, "what I've seen with not everyone but with most of the farmers is that they've been very proactive about mitigating their water use, looking forward and being more sustainable," said Spratling, who irrigates with deep wells. "We're not going to be irrigating and farming if we don't do something."

Farmer Ryan Telford has some ground in the soon-to-be administered Big Lost basin — where he irrigates with groundwater and surface water — and some ground already subject to



Milepost 29 aquifer recharge basin in southern Idaho. (Courtesy Idaho Department of Water Resources)

administration to the south and west. For the Arco area, part of the Big Lost, "there's going to be a learning curve," he said. "It's dry, dry, dry."

Curtailment

Through an annual water rights call during irrigation season, the Water Resources director issues an order stating the volume junior groundwater users owe the Surface Water Coalition. Owed volume varies based on water-year conditions and is updated through the season.

Groundwater users per the November 2024 set-

tlement — initially among nine groundwater districts and the coalition — can avoid curtailment by meeting annual usage reduction targets, securing a specified volume for delivery to coalition members, and returning water to the aquifer. The Idaho Water Resource Board since 2014 has managed an aquifer recharge program between irrigation seasons, and the legislature last year increased the annual volume target.

Solutions

"All parties have really stepped up," said Wesley Hipke, water projects man-

ager with the IDWR planning and projects bureau.

The legislature in 2025 allocated money for the department to set up water districts in the expanded rights administration area, and separately directed substantial ongoing funding to water-saving projects; the Water Resource Board's first-year awards focused on Eastern Snake Plain infrastructure.

Groundwater districts are pursuing projects such as groundwater-to-surface-water conversions and recharge infrastruc-

See PACT, Page C11

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U.S. wheat farmers pay nearly \$1 billion more in increased fertilizer costs

By **Matthew Weaver**
Capital Press

Wheat farmers paid nearly \$1 billion in additional costs due to tariffs on phosphate fertilizers, a new report from the National Association of Wheat Growers says.

NAWG points to Texas A&M estimates that countervailing duties on Moroccan phosphate fertilizers cost the producers of major U.S. crops \$6.9 billion across the 2021 to 2025 growing seasons through increased fertilizer costs. Wheat farmers paid \$966 million across the same time period.

Wheat farmers face the second highest fertilizer costs of major field crops as a percentage of operating costs, at 38%, and total costs, 15%, according to the report, which cites USDA production cost projections for the 2026/2027 marketing year.

The projections were published in December before the current conflict in the Middle East “skyrocketed” fertilizer prices, NAWG’s report notes.

“If you are a wheat farmer and you are applying phosphate, it’s impacting your farm,” NAWG president Jamie Kress, a Rockland Valley, Idaho, farmer told Capital Press. “It’s kind of overwhelming to see that (\$1 billion) figure printed on paper,

over five years, above and beyond what we needed to pay.”

Countervailing duties

NAWG points to countervailing duties applied in 2021 on imported phosphate fertilizers from Russia and Morocco. The duties are tariffs on U.S. imports that aim to neutralize specific types of government subsidies given to foreign exporters that materially harm domestic industry, according to the report.

Phosphate fertilizers are manufactured using mined phosphate rock. Phosphorus is one of the three primary nutrients needed to grow crops.

Globally, China and Morocco are the top phosphate rock producers, according to the report. China severely restricts export of phosphate, including a current ban on exports of all phosphate fertilizers.

Morocco has nearly 70% of global phosphate reserves, and is the top exporter of phosphate rock.

In the five years before the countervailing duties were imposed on phosphate fertilizer, imports of Morocco were more than half of U.S. phosphate fertilizer imports in most years. Moroccan phosphate fertilizer imports to the U.S. fell from a total of 3.8 million tons between

2016 to 2020 to 0.2 million tons between 2021 to 2025, and zero imports in 2025, according to NAWG’s report.

State by state

“Unsurprisingly, the states bearing the brunt of the cost from increased fertilizer prices are those with the largest wheat acreage: North Dakota, Kansas, and Montana,” the NAWG report states.

North Dakota farmers faced \$202 million in countervailing duties-related costs. Kansas farmers faced \$141 million and Montana growers faced \$120 million.

In the Pacific Northwest, Idaho paid \$22 million; Washington \$14 million and Oregon \$4 million.

State-level costs are “heavily driven” by different levels of phosphate fertilizer application, NAWG says, noting that the same crop faces different nutrient needs based on local conditions.

For example, South Dakota and Oregon grow a similar number of winter wheat acres, averaging 838,000 acres and 738,000 acres annually between 2021 and 2025, respectively.

But 94% of winter wheat acres in South Dakota are treated with an average of 23 pounds per acre of phosphate, while 20% of Oregon’s acres are treated with

an average of 29 pounds per acre of phosphate.

Next steps

NAWG and other commodity organizations, including the National Corn Growers Association, American Soybean Association, and various state corn, soybean and sorghum associations, sent a letter March 20 asking U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick to revoke the countervailing duty orders.

The International Trade Commission is currently gathering public comment through April 1 as part of its review whether revocation of the countervailing duties would likely

continue or cause material injury to occur.

Removing the tariffs would provide “immediate relief” to farmers, Kress said.

She notes that some domestic fertilizer industry members also support removing the duties.

“Farmers can’t control global markets, but we need to make sure U.S. policy isn’t making it harder to stay in business,” Kress said. “If we’re serious about supporting American agriculture, we should start by removing barriers that are directly raising farmers’ costs.”

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Meet the new Oregon FFA officers

By Kyle Odegard
Capital Press

REDMOND, Ore. — A new group of officers was elected March 22 during the 2026 Oregon FFA State Convention, held at the Deschutes County Fair & Expo Center.

- Anna Kliever of the Lost River FFA chapter was named president.
- Vice president is Braelyn Marino of Forest Grove.
- Tucker VanDyke of the Yamhill-Carlton chapter was elected secretary.
- Treasurer is Dylan Orr of Henley.
- Addie Saunders of Vale was named reporter.
- Sentinel is Callie Kostman of the Crater FFA chapter.

New officers are high school seniors who will take a gap year and work together, traveling around the state as they visit every school with a FFA chapter.

Looking forward to their year of service

The new leadership group said they were grateful, humbled and honored,



Oregon FFA's new leadership group includes (from left) President Anna Kliever of the Lost River FFA chapter, Vice President Braelyn Marino of Forest Grove, Secretary Tucker VanDyke of the Yamhill-Carlton, Treasurer Dylan Orr of Henley, Reporter Addie Saunders of Vale and Sentinel Callie Kostman of Crater. (Kyle Odegard/Capital Press)

and looking forward to their year of service.

"I decided to run for state office because the FFA organization has absolutely changed my life ... I'm so excited to give back," Kliever said.

Marino wants to help teens develop their leadership abilities and discover what they are passionate about.

FFA officers saw her potential before she believed in herself.

"Even a little bit of encouragement can seriously change the lives of our members," said Marino, who also took first place in vegetable production

proficiency.

Van Dyke stressed that FFA wasn't just creating leaders for its organization, but for all of society.

"We're prepping them for the rest of their life. ... I don't think you can find that in any other organization," added VanDyke.

He won the job interview competition at the event, and also was part of Yamhill-Carlton's winning ag sales team at the National FFA Convention.

Orr said FFA student leaders always supported him, and he hoped to reassure members and help them with their struggles.

"We're always in their

corner cheering them on," Orr said.

Saunders and Kostman said they enjoyed meeting other FFA members.

"They are so amazing. They have so many unique stories and they are going far in life," Saunders said.

Kostman, who also was named Star Farmer for Oregon, said talking to fellow members — learning something new or relating to their experiences — can foster connections that make a difference in their lives.

Eight new Oregon FFA chapters welcomed

The 98th Oregon FFA State Convention was held March 19-22, and the event included classes, competitions, a career and educational expo and other activities.

The attendance announced during the final session was roughly 3,600, including members, advisors and guests.

Eight new chapters were welcomed this year, bringing the state total to nearly 130.

Those were Al Kennedy, Eagle Ridge, East Linn

Christian, Glendale, Innovation Academy, Jewel, Oregon City and Pacific.

Oregon's official FFA membership for 2025 was nearly 15,800 students.

Featured speakers include ODA director

The theme of this year's convention was "Rooted."

Lisa Charpiloz Hanson, Oregon Department of Agriculture director, told the crowd that FFA was part of their root system during her speech March 20.

"In agriculture, we know that a strong root system allows us to stand tall, survive and thrive. Roots provide stability, they provide strength and they help us grow. That's really another word for resilience," Charpiloz Hanson said.

Resilience means getting back up after a hard season, adapting after things don't go as planned and continuing to move forward.

"Oregon farmers and ranchers understand resilience better than most, because agriculture teaches us that challenges are part of the journey," Charpiloz Hanson said.



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PACT:

continued from C8

ture, and canal companies are planning or carrying out efficiency improvement projects. The board has increased recharge capacity and is working on creating more so that “in good years, we’re prepared to capture as much water as we can,” Hipke said.

Above average

The 2024 settlement agreement and stipulated mitigation plan allow groundwater users to average their accomplishments over the pact’s four-year term, in part to encourage projects that boost aquifer sustainability.

At an early March meeting among coalition members and representatives of groundwater districts that entered the 2024 agreement, “the No. 1 takeaway was that even in a really dry last year, the groundwater districts saved more than their obligation,” said Idaho Ground Water Appropriators attorney T.J. Budge. “That doesn’t mean they will every year, but that was really encouraging.”

“Everybody is concerned about the effect of this warm winter,” he said.

IGWA comprises groundwater districts that entered the agreement at the outset. Halfway into the averaging period, “the mitigation plan is working as intended,” executive director Lara Herway said.

“Groundwater districts have made significant investments and operational changes to meet the obligations of the 2024 agreement, and members are actively implementing both demand reduction and recharge efforts,” she said. “Agriculture stepped forward with a serious, enforceable plan, and we are now in the process of carrying it out.” The averaging framework aims to smooth year-to-year variability in hydrology, “so the real story at the halfway mark is the scale of implementation and the ongoing collaboration between groundwater and surface water users.”

IGWA members so far have saved substantially more groundwater than required, and “all signs are pointing toward the agree-

ment being very effective,” Herway said.

Projects, cooperation

Bingham Ground Water District is adding recharge capacity and pursuing groundwater-to-surface-water conversions. The Blackfoot-based district also has been installing equipment to measure usage remotely in real time, and to monitor the water table.

“If plenty of surface water is available, we want to be able to use it,” manager Alan Jackson said. “If surface water is scarce, maybe that’s a better time to be using the groundwater if available. It’s all about timing, identifying the best available supply and getting

access.”

Such timing is a key reason groundwater and surface water users need to keep working together, he said. “Collaboration is the most important thing.”

Young Family Farms, in the Blackfoot area, last spring stopped irrigating more than 100 acres previously watered with pivot sprinkler end guns and last fall put about 22 acres previously irrigated by hand and wheel lines into the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, farmer Adam Young said.

“Farmers are making real changes and sometimes drastic changes” in how they manage land, he said.



Raft River-area farmer Lucas Spratling, right, with son Orlin. (Courtesy Lucas Spratling)

See PACT, Page C12



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1988 BARBEL STAINLESS STEEL TANK TRAILER, 7000 GALLONS, 1 COMPARTMENT, DOUBLE CONICAL / CENTER DISCHARGE, SPRING RIDE SUSPENSION, 295/75R22.5 TIRES, STEEL WHEELS, 3" STAINLESS QRB STYLE VALVE AT THE CENTER, HOSE TRAY RIGHT SIDE, 60% BRAKES, 60% TIRES, BAR-BEL 42' 7000 GAL SS TANKER



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PACT:

continued from C11

“Those efforts are yielding real results and are changing the trajectory we are on in terms of keeping the aquifer and the river healthy.”

Surface water perspective “It’s a good sign they are working to help improve the aquifer,” Alan Hansten, general manager of coalition member North Side Canal Co., said of groundwater districts that signed onto the 2024 settlement. “It’s good to see they are going above and beyond what was originally contemplated in the agreement.”

“It’s important that (groundwater users) be able to function within their allocations — and it sounds like, by and large, they are accomplishing that halfway through the first four-year stint” of the agreement, said Jay Barlogi, general manager of coalition member Twin Falls Canal Co., which is working on a major efficiency improvement project. “Equally important is that if some of them don’t, that the state go out and enforce.”

Ideally, compliance continues “while we wait for all of these other good actions happening out there,” he said. “This is a really bad water year shaping up,” with

less storage water available because of reservoir conditions and prospective lower reach gains.

Aquifer discharge into the Blackfoot to Minidoka reach of the Snake River — important to the supply outlook — improved last year.

Typically in an irrigation season, Twin Falls Canal Co. and American Falls Reservoir District No. 2 end up in the “injured” category, American Falls district board chairman Jim Ritchie said. TFCC’s right is predominantly river flow whereas AFRD 2 relies on reservoir storage.

The American Falls district was injured last year and in 2024.

“The groundwater districts did what was required,” Ritchie said. “I really think everybody’s trying. Surface water doesn’t want to see our groundwater neighbors lose their livelihoods, or vice versa.”

The settlement agreement is a “very good starting point,” he said. “Neither party got exactly what it wanted, so in that respect it’s probably a good agreement.”

“I think it’s working,” said Travis Thompson, an attorney for the coalition. “Certainly the resource will

See PACT, Page C13

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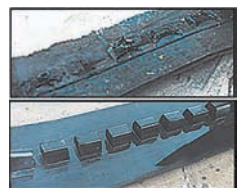
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Blackfoot-area farmer Adam Young. (Courtesy Adam Young)

PACT:
continued from C12

kind of be the telling issue ... Once we get into the 2027 irrigation season, individuals who have had this four-year allocation will be able to see what's left, and that will be reported on a monthly basis."

Mitigation Groundwater users and districts can avoid curtailment by securing Department of Water Resources approval of their own mitigation plan or by joining an approved plan — including the 2024 stipulated mitigation plan derived from the settlement agreement.

The Jefferson-Clark Ground Water District in 2024 joined the settlement after submitting its own plan that IDWR opposed initially, district manager Bill Stoddart said.

The district is isolated from and above the river, which limits opportunities

to economically build projects to move surface water, when available, onto its system, he said. About one-third of the district's acres are irrigated by groundwater pumped into canals or Mud Lake. Some members have projects, such as canal lining.

"What we can do is reduction of groundwater pumping and use," Stoddart said. The district also can buy water from other places for recharge, which can impact the aquifer faster.

The agreement so far is helping the aquifer, Young said.

"As we recognize the efforts that have been made and are currently being made, it's important we maintain an open dialogue, stay patient with each other and continue to make efforts to adjust our practices to ensure we sustain the aquifer and the river long term," he said.



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Anderson Hay seeks to sell Oregon facility, exit straw business

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

A major Northwest forage exporter, Anderson Hay, wants to sell its Oregon processing facility and exit the straw business as part of its Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization.

The company has asked a bankruptcy judge for permission to sell its straw processing facility in Aurora, Ore., for \$10.75 million and use most of the proceeds to pay a major creditor.

"The Aurora Facility does not consistently operate profitably and exiting the straw industry is a vital part of the Debtors' internal restructuring of their businesses," according to Anderson Hay's motion.

The transaction could

be significant for Oregon's grass seed farmers, who for years have been baling and selling straw for the export market to supplement their incomes after field burning was largely prohibited.

But according to Anderson Hay, the processing facility is "currently under-utilized," as it was "originally built for significantly higher volumes."

The facility is not "consistently providing an appropriate return" due to the "declining straw market," so it's in the best interests of the company and its creditors to cease operations at the site and "liquidate related equipment," the document said.

"In addition, given the size and condition of the plant, the capital tied up in



Anderson Hay is asking a bankruptcy judge to OK the sale of its Aurora, Ore., straw facility, and allow it to use the proceeds to pay a major creditor. (Capital Press file photo)

the facility is out of proportion to the returns currently available in the grass straw market," according to the motion. "The Debtors believe freeing up capital for other uses and evaluating more appropriate approaches in the grass straw market is a prudent decision given the current dynamics of the market and their position in it."

The facility includes a 41,000-square-foot processing and production building, about 320,000 square feet of hay storage, and other structures on more than 26 acres in an agricultural zone north

of Aurora, Ore.

Buyer on the line

The property would apparently be sold to entrepreneurs who intend to revive textile manufacturing from flax fiber in Oregon, based on a real estate purchase agreement and business records filed with the state's Secretary of State.

The facility would be purchased by the Millicent Property Co., whose manager is Will Altschwager, in place of the Oregon Flax Co. The latter company's managers are listed as Fibrevolution and Coast Fibers, which are involved in flax textile manufacturing. Altschwager is also named as the CEO of Coast Fibers, a firm he co-founded with the owners of Fibrevolution last year.

Anderson Hay has been considering the Aurora facility's sale or alternative use for about four years,

including as a "potential Tesla crash facility," but has found it to be a "challenging property," according to the company's court filing.

The property lacks surface water irrigation, limiting its agricultural uses, but it's zoned for "exclusive farm use," which restricts non-agricultural development, the filing said. An attorney advised the company that trying to change the zoning would be "futile."

Aside from the Millicent Property Co., which has entered into a real estate purchase agreement, only one other buyer expressed interest in the facility, but lacked the necessary capital to offer a competitive price, the document said.

The potential deal with Millicent represents "the highest and best offer for the property," and after subtracting closing costs, the proceeds would allow Anderson Hay to pay down about \$10 million worth of debt to PGIM Real Estate Finance, which is owed about \$15 million, according to court filings.

During a recent bankruptcy court hearing, an attorney for Anderson Hay said the company is on track to pay farmers by May 1 for crops delivered before its bankruptcy filing last year, and also to submit a reorganization plan by that date.

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Dreams of becoming Oregon dairy princess, just like mom, become reality

By Kyle Odegard
Capital Press

Grace Faber always dreamed of being the Oregon Dairy Princess Ambassador.

As a little girl she ran around her house in her mom's crown and sash — Trisha Faber, then Trisha Platt, was state alternate in 2002 — and even wore that regalia for Halloween at age 12.

"I've looked through her scrapbook from being a princess so many times," Faber said.

On March 10, the Linn-Benton Community College student, representing Polk County, was crowned Oregon's Dairy Princess Ambassador for 2026-27.

Chloe Bingman, dual enrolled at Chemeketa Community College and Oregon State University, was named Alternate Oregon Dairy Princess Ambassador.

Faber and Bingman will spend the next year traveling throughout the state, attending fairs, town meetings and public events as representatives of Oregon's dairy farmers.

They will also visit schools, telling students about life on a dairy farm and dairy products' nutritional benefits.

Advocating for dairy industry

Faber, a Santiam Christian High School graduate, partici-

pated in 4-H and FFA.

Her favorite childhood memories are of playing at her grandparents' farm, Platt's Oak Hill Dairy in Independence, Ore.

Her grandfather, Jack Platt, inspired her love of dairy farming. In seventh grade, he gave Faber her first cow, Blossom, which she showed at the Polk County Fair.

Faber, who now has a herd of 13 show cows, hopes the fairgrounds remain open because events there show children the value of hard work.

"When I was little, I wanted to become a dairy princess because I wanted to wear a tiara and hang out with cows," Faber said.

That retains its appeal, but Faber's motivation has matured.

"I've seen the hardships in the dairy industry and I've seen what our farmers go through," Faber said.

She looks forward to advocating for the industry, educating people on how well the animals are treated and promoting dairy products.

Faber added there are many misconceptions she wanted to correct.

"This is a hard industry and you really have to love what you do to be a dairy farmer," she said.

Faber is studying animal sciences with an emphasis in



Recently crowned Chloe Bingman (left), Alternate Oregon Dairy Princess Ambassador, and Grace Faber, Oregon Dairy Princess Ambassador, handed out samples of Darigold milk during the 2026 Oregon FFA State Convention on March 21. Dairy royalty often are some of the most popular people at events because of the dairy treats they provide. (Kyle Odegard/Capital Press)

dairy science at LBCC. She wants to continue working in the dairy industry and is looking at studying genetics since artificial insemination has become so critical.

Faber's family also has royal dairy connections in another way.

Her cousin Rebecca Noordam was the state dairy princess alternate two years ago.

Scholarships, other dairy princess finalists

Faber and Bingman received scholarships to support their education.

Outgoing Oregon Dairy Princess Ambassador Cydney Stables and alternate Anna Wismer received \$21,350 and \$11,500 respectively for their year of service, during which they visited with more than 13,000 students.

Bingman, 20, of Yamhill County, is a 2024 graduate of Amity High School who participated in FFA.

She also showed dairy heifers at the Yamhill County Fair and Oregon State Fair.

Other state finalists were PaytonLynn Baldwin of Marion County, Isabel Wedam of Morrow County, Simone Ferguson of Tillamook County and Taylor Lovelady of Washington County.

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