



OP-ED by Yamhill County Dairy Farmer, Robert Kircher

NOBODY WINS WITH MANDATORY AGRICULTURAL OVERTIME POLICIES

I was not born into the dairy industry; it was introduced to me at a young age of around 12 years old, and I've stuck with it.

We are an organic, family-run dairy in the Willamette Valley. We grow a majority of the feed for our animals and other organic crops for human consumption. We employ about 50 full-time workers year-round. Producing high-quality, nutritious milk takes hard work and dedication. When we have days with no electricity because of an ice storm or when it's 115 degrees outside, we dairy farmers cannot sit in the house where it is warm or cool. We are outside all day, sometimes through the night, seven days a week, 365 days a year, ensuring our animals are fed, watered, and cared for. We can make it through these tough times because of our dedicated employees.

Today many people do not understand what it takes to produce high-quality, nutritious food. Farmers across the country operate on very thin margins, and they work according to the weather. When crops are ready to be planted or harvested, no matter how many hours it takes, it's got to get done.

We also do not have the ability to set the price we are paid for our milk. But every year, our costs continue to increase, whether it is labor, feed, fuel, materials, equipment, and other inputs. Over the last year, these prices have skyrocketed because of inflation; our current milk price has not reflected these increases. Now, Oregon House Bill 4002 is set to make things worse by mandating overtime pay for agricultural workers who were previously exempt.

Every year more and more dairy farms continue to go out of business because of increased regulations and low or negative margins. There have been 22 dairy farms in the last two years that closed in Oregon. We have less than 200 dairy farms left in the state. Farmers cannot afford to incur more costs of doing business unless the public is okay with paying \$10 for a gallon of milk.

Many of our employees have been working for us for decades. Some of their now-adult kids work for us, too. We treat them all fairly, pay them a good wage and help them out in times of need when we can. All our employees receive 1-2 days off per week, no matter what time of year it is. We do this because we understand the need for rest and time with their families. We are very proud of our team; we couldn't do it without them. We are very aware that all of our employees are very skilled and hardworking. And in today's labor climate, if we don't pay them a fair wage, they could easily go work for someone else. I cannot remember the last time we paid minimum wage to anyone working for us. This is hard work, and people deserve to be paid a fair wage for doing it.

Finding new employees is a considerable challenge, however, as the labor pool seems to have disappeared. Many years ago, we had several people come by the farm looking for jobs per month. Now we see maybe one person every couple of months. Many people don't want to work in agriculture, let alone milk cows. This makes me wonder what our food supply will be like in 10 years if we continue to experience increased costs of doing business along with more and more farms going out of business.

If a 40-hour overtime rule is enacted with HB 4002, we will not be able to afford it. Neither will our employees because they will be limited to 40 hours a week. We will be forced to invest in robotics and other labor-saving equipment. In the end, there will be fewer farms, fewer jobs, and employees will receive a smaller paycheck. Who wins in this situation?

I strongly oppose forcing Oregon's livestock producers to pay mandatory overtime over 40 hours.