

OP-ED: Mike Townsend, Townsend Farms, Fairview, OR

Farmers – and consumers – will suffer from agricultural overtime mandate

By Mike Townsend

The agricultural world is a lot different now than it was when I started running Townsend Farms in Fairview, Oregon, in 1980. What used to be a sea of strawberry and raspberry fields in Western Oregon has been transformed mostly into subdivisions and other development as land has skyrocketed in value along with the state's population.

Oregonians haven't stopped buying fruits and vegetables. But fewer and fewer come from local growers. An ever-shrinking percentage of local blueberries and blackberries and very few strawberries are now grown in Oregon, as large retailers have opted to buy cheaper berries from foreign countries with cheaper labor, often as low as \$2 to \$4 an hour.

In the last two decades, the size of Oregon's locally produced strawberry crop has fallen from around 80 million pounds annually to just 8 million pounds. Raspberries have seen an even more significant fall, from roughly 15 million pounds a year to not more than 500,000 pounds a year.

Local growers now rely primarily on blueberries and blackberries. But between 2009 and 2021, the cost to prune and wrap an acre of blackberries has jumped from \$800 to \$1,800. Combined with an ever-increasing minimum wage in Oregon, the picture is clear. Blackberries and other fruits from Chile, Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Serbia, and other countries are taking an ever-larger share of the local market away from local growers.

We still employ upward of 1,400 people at Townsend Farms during the peak of the harvest months and closer to 400 people during the rest of the year at our two packing facilities and farms. This includes our fruit processing operation workers and the seasonal workers that we employ (at \$16.34 an hour in 2021) and temporarily house on H2A visas. Those costs also grow annually.

Labor, however, is not the only issue affecting local growers. More stringent food safety regulations in the U.S. and the increased cost of fuel, fertilizer, and other chemicals contribute. And now, the Oregon Legislature is considering new legislation that would mandate overtime pay for agricultural workers putting in more than 40 hours a week, even though this type of workload only happens for a few weeks at a time during the height of harvest season.

Therefore, as a voter, we would hope you would consider the impact of the cost increases that it will take for your local growers to stay in business. This includes the fact that reliance on food imports also contributes to the exact global climate change that a recent study by Environmental Toxicologist Deke Gunderson of Pacific University concluded is "already causing significant impacts on farms."

The next generation has asked us to be more concerned about our climate. And as good stewards of our land, we need to point out that importing too high of a percentage of frozen and fresh products can and will continue to impact the environment negatively. We must take precautions to take care of what God has given us, the land, and the crops.

We want to help voters understand the effects of policies that will contribute to the rising labor cost in Oregon, including a law mandating overtime pay. Because the alternative is a continual rise in the price of both fresh and frozen produce for consumers – and the continued erosion of Oregon's treasured agricultural industry.