

CAP AND TRADE

In the minority

In Eastern Oregon, cap and trade supporters form a vocal minority

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East Oregonian

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

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

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

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

INSIDE

As Oregon lawmakers clash over a controversial bill to curb the state’s greenhouse gas emissions, Mimi Casteel says climate change is already posing a major identity crisis for winegrowers. **Page A7**

About three weeks later, most Republicans would join together in a bicameral walkout to deny Democrats the necessary quorum to pass SB 1530. Their ranks included Northeast Oregon’s entire legislative delegation — Rep. Greg Barreto, R-Cove, Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, and Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena.

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

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

But to Republicans, it’s also another battle in the urban-rural divide, a law mostly supported by people in the Willamette Valley but imposed on rural Oregonians who don’t want it and will feel it in the form of higher gas and electricity prices.

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

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

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

The tribes call the natural resources that have

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COAL

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



SALMON

Coho salmon smolts shoot out of a hose into the Lostine River on March 10 outside of Wallowa. The Nez Perce tribe was reintroducing the fish to the river after a 31-year absence of a coho salmon run.



CLIMATE

An Oregon Department of Forestry firefighter uses a hose line to douse flames while battling a fire on Cabbage Hill east of Pendleton in 2018.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney, File

Heppner teens display signs to passing motorists during a climate change rally in May 2019 at Heppner City Park.

Minority: Supporters a vocal minority

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traditionally sustained the tribes First Foods, a list that includes berries, roots and salmon.

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

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

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

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

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

"They have the option to vote against a bill. If they disagree with a piece of legislation, they should vote in opposition, but they shouldn't make it impossible for people in favor to vote that way," he wrote. "These legislators are turning a blind eye towards my generation, the generation who will have to suffer the consequences of their actions."

Although organizations that support efforts to reduce climate change are much less prevalent in Eastern Oregon than they

are west of the Cascades, they do exist.

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

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

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

"Forestry is all about the long term," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's a small group, but

over here in Eastern Oregon it's definitely a minority viewpoint for sure," he said. "I just don't think a lot of the folks have really been exposed to the other side of the issue."

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

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

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

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

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

But she understands that natural resources flow freely between the reservation and the rest of the country, regardless of walls, and they must be shared to ensure their survival in the era of climate change.

"We have been taught as tribal leaders that we need to protect those resources so we can live off the land, breathe the air, and drink clean, clear water," she said. "So it's very important to all of us. Not just the tribes, but to all of us."