

## People &amp; Places

## Reviving National Farmers Union in NW

Kent Wright, regional president, is optimistic of organization's return

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

Bellevue, a sprawling satellite city of Seattle, is an unlikely place for agricultural milestones. But it's where the National Farmers Union will have its 2019 national convention, and it's where the Northwest division hopes to re-establish itself as a full partner in the 115-year-old organization.

"Our goal is to have a strong contingent at that event," said the fledgling division's president, sixth-generation rancher Kent Wright. "I will feel disappointed if we don't have at least the most people."

The National Farmers Union's history in the Northwest goes back to 1907, the year a Washington division was formed. In recent years, though, the group has been mostly dormant in the region.

The rebirth of a Northwest division — Washington, Oregon and Idaho — and the national group's decision to hold its convention in Bellevue are unrelated. The group meets each year in urban areas. This year, the convention was in San Diego and next year it will be in Kansas City.

But the 2019 convention will be an opportunity for the Northwest division to make a showing. This year's national convention had two Northwest representatives, Wright and his wife, Tiffany, the division's secretary.

Wright, 30, grew up on his family's ranch near St. John in Eastern Washington and works there part-time. He said he expects to run the ranch full-time someday, but for now he lives in Vancouver, where Tiffany is a hospital nurse, and he pursues his other career as a baseball scout.

Wright played baseball at Walla Walla Community College and West Texas A&M University. For several summers after college, he played in independent professional leagues stocked with players, like Wright, striving to impress a major league team.

Primarily a catcher, he played for clubs such as the Kalamazoo Kings, Fort Worth Cats, Rockford Riverhawks, Amarillo Dillas and Wichita Wingnuts. He wasn't signed by a major league organization, but he made a connec-



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Kent Wright, president of the Northwest division of the National Farmers Union, foresees the region re-establishing itself as a full partner in the 115-year-old organization.

tion that led to a job as international scouting director for the Doosan Bears, a team in South Korea's top baseball league. Wright scouts and signs the three foreign-born players allowed on the team's roster.

### Younger members

Although he grew up on a ranch, Wright said he had never heard of the National Farmers Union until he was picked in 2012 for the organization's young farmer program. He soon was president of the Washington division, which had about 40 lifetime members, but few active ones. About two years later, the Washington, Oregon and Idaho divisions combined to create a Northwest division.

Wright, his wife and his mother, Peggy, are three of the division's seven board members. He said the Northwest has about 180 members. It will need at least 1,250 members to have a vote in how the national organization is run. Moses Lake cattleman Mark Ellis said that under Wright's leadership the Northwest division has provided livestock producers with another avenue for speaking out on issues.

"Kent's a very bright guy," Ellis said. "I don't know if there's a better national organization than the Farmers

Union as far as getting young people into farming."

Wright said most of the division's members are under 40, a generation younger than most farmers.

Tiffany Wright started a division at Walla Walla Community College and has twice been honored at the national level for recruiting members.

Kent Wright said the group has history and clout, but it's small enough for individuals to influence. "Your voice does matter if you work a little bit and show up," he said.

The Farmers Union nationwide has almost 200,000 members, with 24 divisions in 33 states, the national membership director, Tom Bryant, said.

North Dakota and Oklahoma have the largest memberships, while the organization has no presence in many Southeast states. Membership tends to be steady, though it picks up when the farm economy slumps, Bryant said. "When things aren't going so well, people realize it's important to speak collectively," he said.

The group is a little older, but much smaller, than the American Farm Bureau Federation, which has affiliates in 50 states and nearly 6 million member families.

Other differences between the two organizations are rooted in their histories. The

Farmers Union was formed in 1902 in a time of agrarian populism. The Farm Bureau became a national organization in 1920, a period of conservative ascendancy.

The Farmers Union holds more liberal views on issues such as health care and climate change, and is more critical of trade deals.

"It's all relative," Farmers Union spokesman Andrew Jerome said. "A little more liberal than the Farm Bureau? Maybe yes. But a liberal group? Certainly not."

Wright agreed that the Farmers Union is generally viewed as more liberal than the Farm Bureau on the national level. "Here in the Northwest, I say we probably fight that a little. We tend to be a pretty conservative group," he said.

### The beginning

The National Farmers Union was founded in Texas by men concerned about the price farmers were paid for cotton.

By 1907, the Farmers Union was growing into a nationwide organization. The Evening Statesman, a Walla Walla newspaper, reported the formation of a Washington division under the headline, "Farmers Meet to Form Trust to Boost Prices."

The goal was to make wheat farmers price-setters,



## Western Innovator

### Kent Wright

Age: 30

Residence: Vancouver, Wash.

Position: President of the Northwest division of the National Farmers Union

Occupation: Sixth-generation rancher from St. John, Wash. Owns Wright Way Angus with his mother, Peggy Wright

Non-farm job: International scouting director for the Doosan Bears, a team in South Korea's top baseball league

Education: Walla Walla Community College; bachelor's degree in wildlife biology, West Texas A&M University; master's degree in science, Western Kentucky University

Family: Wife, Tiffany; son, Maverick, 4

not price-takers.

"The greatest product of the country is wheat and to fix the price of this cereal is now the great object of the union," an organizer told The Evening Statesman.

Today, the Farmers Union still stresses the farmers' share. Its website charts the relatively small amount farmers receive compared to the retail cost of staples such as potatoes, eggs and flour.

While the Washington Farm Bureau has a steady and influential presence in Olympia, the Farmers Union does not. Its main venture into state policy so far has been to oppose raising the fee on cattle transactions that ranchers pay to support the Washington Beef Commission. The position aligned with the Cattle Producers of Washington and was at odds with the Washington Farm Bureau and other cattle industry groups such as the Washington Cattlemen's Association and the Washington Cattle Feeders Association.

Wright said the Northwest division has no plans to hire a lobbyist.

"We don't feel at this time it's the best approach for a young, regrowing group to get its point across," he said.

That, however, could change someday, he said.

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We want to publish corrections to set the record straight.

## Calendar

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20 Northwest Locations

1-800-765-9055

To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301 or emailed to newsroom@capitalpress.com.

### Friday, June 16

Square Dance and Benefit for Oregon Pasture Network. 7-10 p.m. ZCBJ Hall, 38704 N. Main St., Scio, Ore. Join us for a night of family-friendly fun with live music and square dancing. Beginners welcome. All dances will be called. The Slippery Slope String Band will provide the music for the night's festivities, and the acclaimed Woody Lane will be our square dance caller. Proceeds will be used to support the Oregon Pasture Network, a project of Friends of Family Farmers designed to support the growth of pasture-based farming in our state. OPN is a community of farmers, ranchers, food business owners and consumers who believe that sustainable, humane, pasture-raised, animal agriculture is the best way to produce animal products. Tickets are \$10 per person (kids 12 and under are free) and can be purchased at online or at the door. Kids 12 and under are free. For more info visit friendsfamilyfarmers.org.

### Friday-Sunday June 16-18

Glenwood Ketchum Kalf Rodeo and Bull Bash. Glenwood Rodeo Grounds, Trout Lake Highway, Glenwood, Wash. The Bull Bash starts at 7 p.m. June 16, followed by the rodeo, which starts at

12:30 p.m. June 17-18. Website: http://business.gorge.net/glenwoodrodeo.

### Saturday, June 17

Forest Thinning and Pruning Field Day. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. University of Idaho Extension office, 1808 N. Third St., Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Whether you have problems with insects, disease or concerns about fire, the response from foresters is nearly universal: Thin your forest. Presentations about thinning and financial assistance will be followed by a field trip to a thinned stand. A \$20 fee includes a field notebook or publications.

### Tuesday, June 20

Trees and Taxes workshop. 5-7:30 p.m. Coos County Extension Office, 631 Alder St., Myrtle Point, Ore. This class is for anyone with forest management expenses, recent forest income or planning for future income from their forestland. Tammy Cushing, OSU Extension specialist in forest economics, management and policy, will explain topics many landowners are unaware of and the special provisions in the Internal Revenue Code that pertain to forestland and income generated from the land. This session will help improve the records you keep on your forestland as well as minimize the taxes that you pay for income generated by your forest. Pre-registration is required by June 16. For questions, call Shawna at 541-572-5263. Website: http://extension.oregonstate.edu/coos/.

### Tuesday-Wednesday June 20-21

Center for Produce Safety Re-

search Symposium. Hyatt Regency Denver Tech Center, 7800 E. Tufts Ave., Denver, Colo. Agricultural water will kick off the program agenda. This session will focus on four CPS-funded research programs that will help stakeholders better understand the factors involved in sourcing, sampling, testing and treating specific types of agricultural water.

### Thursday, June 22

Oregon Angus Field Day. 4-10 p.m. Quail Valley Ranch, Prineville, Ore. Cattle on display, contests with prizes, a meal and a time to visit. For more information, contact Becky Tekansik, Quail Valley Ranch, 541-699-8562, or Dick Hubman, president of the Oregon Angus Association, 541-601-5495.

### Saturday, June 24

Washington State Dairy Ambassador Coronation. 5-9 p.m. Byrnes Performing Arts Center, 18821 Crown Ridge Blvd., Arlington, Wash. Doors open at 5 p.m. with the program beginning at 5:30. This year dinner will not be provided; instead there will be light hors d'oeuvres and refreshments served during a short intermission. Tickets purchased by June 16 will be adults \$20, students \$10, and under 6 years free. Tickets purchased after June 16 or at the door will be adults \$25, students \$15, under 6 still free. For ticket information, please contact Gloria Edwards by email at gloria.wsdw@hotmail.com or 360-273-7313. Website: http://wastatedairywomen.org/ambassador-contest.html

### Tuesday, June 27

Range Field Day. 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Northern Great Basin Experimental Range, 100 Placidea Butte

Road, Riley, Ore. Presentations will include managing wildfires, livestock grazing for fuels management, safe sites and restoration of sagebrush rangeland. For more information, contact Chad Boyd, office: 541-573-8939, cell: 541-589-4990, email: chad.boyd@oregonstate.edu. To RSVP for lunch, call Petrina White at 541-573-4085.

### Wednesday, June 28

Caneberry Field Day. 1-5 p.m. North Willamette Research and Extension Center, 15210 NE Mileley Road, Aurora, Ore. Pesticide registration updates; pollinator protection; weed management; and an introduction to two new OSU faculty members, Greg O'Neill, IR-4 Field Center Director, NWREC, and Marcelo Moretti, weed management, Department of Horticulture. Other topics are the spotted wing drosophila, strategies for replanting red raspberry, biocontrol of brown marmorated stink bug and irrigation practices to enhance fruit quality. Walk through the latest advanced selections and new cultivars in the caneberry breeding plots. Website: http://oregonstate.edu/dept/NWREC/

### Wednesday-Saturday June 28-July 1

128th Annual Washington State Grange Convention. Ocean Shores Convention Center, 120 W. Chance a La Mer NW, Ocean Shores, Wash.

### Thursday-Friday June 29-30

3rd International Conference on Livestock & Nutrition. 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Avani Atrium, 880 Phetchaburi Road, Bangkok, Thailand. The Bangkok Livestock

Nutrition Conference welcomes attendees, presenters and exhibitors from all over the world. Cost: \$699. Website: http://livestocknutrition.conferenceseries.com/.

### Friday, June 30

Farm Practices to Support Beneficial Insects. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Day 2 of this two-day class will offer a tour of the Wandering Fields farm in the Applegate area. Participants will practice identifying beneficials and observe how a blend of hedgerows, cover crops, flowering seed crops and native plants creates a system of biological pest management. Participation on Day 1 on June 9 is a requirement to attend the tour. Cost: \$15 one/\$25 two from the same farm. Website: http://bit.ly/JacksonSmallFarm-Dream.

Bark Beetle Field Day. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. University of Idaho Extension Kootenai County office, 1808 N. Third St., Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Participants will get first-hand exposure to major bark beetles' biology and research into controlling bark beetles. Pre-register by June 23. Cost: \$20 (\$22 with a credit card at www.uidaho.edu/BarkBeetle) Website: www.uidaho.edu/extension/forestry

### Friday-Tuesday June 30-July 4

St. Paul Rodeo. Rodeo Arena, 20045 Fourth St. NE, St. Paul, Ore. The St. Paul Rodeo will continue to bring a slice of the old West to the north Willamette Valley. Information: (503) 633-2011, tickets@stpaulrodeo.com, Website: http://www.stpaulrodeo.com/