

Strengthening Oregon’s food systems

By Kym Pokorny
OSU Extension Service

CORVALLIS – Two Oregon State University Extension Service Small Farms program projects have been awarded U.S. Department of Agriculture grants totaling more than \$800,000 to strengthen the viability of Oregon’s small and mid-scale farms and food businesses.

The OSU Center for Small Farms & Community Food Systems received a \$249,511 grant from USDA’s Regional Food Systems Partnerships program to work with eight Oregon food hubs — businesses or nonprofits that manage distribution, marketing, networking, and aggregation of locally grown food, said Lauren Gwin, associate director of the center.

Food hubs share tools and knowledge to improve long-term sustainability for small- and mid-scale operations, while at the same time prioritizing values and practices such as racial equity, climate change resilience, and fair labor practices. Hubs connect growers and food makers to markets and provide a framework for collaborative research, training, and planning, Gwin said.

Sarah Sullivan of the Gorge Grown Food Network in Hood River is one of the hubs that will benefit from the grant.

“We are excited to deepen our work with partners across the state to build an inclusive regional food system based on equity, regenerative agriculture, and fair labor practices,” Sullivan said. “By aligning our values to strengthen the infrastructure needed to coordinate local food production, aggregation, and distribution, I believe we can really move

the needle on food security. This project allows us the opportunity to actualize what we’ve been working toward for years: quality, fresh, local food for everyone.”

OSU Extension’s Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network received a \$591,951 grant to create a stronger mid-tier niche meat supply chain through training, business coaching, and peer support, said Rebecca Thistlethwaite, director of the network.

In a project called Meat in the Middle, Thistlethwaite will build on OSU Extension’s Western Meat School, an online course that has become popular with direct-to-consumer producers. Meat in the Middle will provide virtual short courses, business mastermind groups, coaching, peer support, and learning tools for at least 1,800 farmers, ranchers, meat processors, and butchers across the country.”

In each of their programs, Gwin and Thistlethwaite will show producers and processors how to coordinate and collaborate with vital but expensive infrastructure such as trucks and cold storage, as well as coordinating under a shared brand. This knowledge will allow them to move into larger urban markets.

The concept of Thistlethwaite’s grant is to create more extensive educational resources for farmers and processors who want to grow their businesses. Both producers and processors need additional training, business coaching, and peer support to create stronger and more plentiful mid-tier niche meat supply chains, she said.

There are fewer mid-scale meat producers and processors in the state compared to small-scale operations, which limits the ability for producers

and brands to reach wholesale markets such as restaurant chains, food service, and retailers, Thistlethwaite said.

To build stronger businesses both meat producers and processors need to learn how to scale up efficiently, sustainably, and in a financially sound manner, Thistlethwaite said. She expects participants to communicate and work more effectively with one another, build business-to-business relationships, learn important financial benchmarking skills, write marketing plans, and learn to scale effectively while staying true to their values.

Both grant projects are embedded in fundamental values that will contribute to a financially sound industry while also creating improved working conditions, paying attention to climate change and racial equality.

“The folks who run local food hubs are motivated to solve some of the food system’s most difficult challenges,” Gwin said. “They want to provide good jobs in a typically thin-margin industry, push back against persistent racial inequity in food and farming, and help their communities be more resilient to drought, heat waves, and other climate change disruptions. So how can they put this into practice, in their own hubs? That’s what we’re going to find out.”

Partners for Gwin’s grant, in addition to the food hubs, include the Oregon Food Hub Network, which is part of the Oregon Community Food Systems Network; Black Food Sovereignty Coalition; Ecotrust; Oregon Climate & Agriculture Network; Oregon Economic Development Districts; Market of Choice, and the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

There must have been some magic...



PHOTO BY JESS DRAPER

As temperatures warmed on Thursday, December 30, and snow softened, many locals headed out to play in the snow. Five-year-old Daphne Draper was pleased to mark “building a snowman” and “having a snowball fight with mom” off her winter list before the school break ended on Monday, January 3.

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