

FLOWERS

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she has enough plants in bloom, she sells bouquets at local stores and at the farm. Also, Merrigan will have “flower bar” events where visitors will be able to choose from a collection of fresh-cut flowers.

“People will be able to build their own bouquets with flowers they picked,” said Merrigan, who has long dreamed of starting her own flower business.

A Community Supported Agriculture program is also part of Merrigan’s business model. People participating in it pay a fee and then will be provided with five bouquets over a span of five months each year. Merrigan will be selling 15 CSA memberships this year.

A lift from the FFA

Merrigan started her business with help from three members of Imbler High School’s FFA chapter, freshmen Tayler Bowles, Izabel Martin and Alex-

MORE INFORMATION

Merrigan’s Fresh Cut Flowers can be contacted via its Facebook page or via email, smerrigan440@gmail.com.

andria Monger. The students are doing marketing work for Merrigan and have taken steps like helping create a logo for her business, establishing a price range for her bouquets and creating ads.

“They have provided invaluable help,” she said.

This is fitting — Merrigan has been a major Imbler High School FFA booster for years.

“Stacey Merrigan is a superstar. She is one of the most loyal supporters of FFA I can think of,” said Imbler School District Superintendent Doug Hislop.

The business owner said she has enjoyed working with Martin, Monger and Bowles.

“I am learning from them and they are learning from me,” she said.

Monger said assisting



Dick Mason/The Observer

Stacey Merrigan, owner of Merrigan’s Fresh Cut Flowers, on Monday, May 9, 2022, shows some of the blooms she has grown this spring on her farm in Imbler.

Merrigan has been a tremendous experience.

“To be able to help someone start something she has always dreamed of is exciting,” the IHS freshman said.

The students presented a report on their work with Merrigan at the state FFA convention in Redmond in March. The report pro-

pelled the IHS team to a second-place finish in the Career Development Marketing competition. J.D. Cant, the school’s FFA adviser, said that the second-place finish was especially notable considering the team was competing against teams composed of older students.

Merrigan said that in

addition to the school’s FFA chapter, she has received a lot of help from her family, including her husband, Bill, the general manager at Blue Mountain Seeds in Imbler, which is not associated with the flower business.

“He is my agronomist. I go to him with questions about everything including

plants, soils and equipment,” Merrigan said about her husband’s contribution.

The new business owner also credits advice she is receiving from the Small Business Development Center at Eastern Oregon University with giving her a boost.

“They have been really helpful,” she said

A labor of love

To compensate for the absence of a greenhouse, Merrigan is setting up garden tunnels, above-ground plastic covered tube-like structures that warm the soil in the spring, providing a microclimate flowers can thrive in.

“They keep them warm and protect them from the wind,” she said.

Growing flowers is never a chore for Merrigan and she hopes her flowers can brighten lives.

“It is very much a labor of love,” she said. “I want to bring joy into the lives of others. We need more joy, especially with the state of the world today.”

SHEEP

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University, then returned to practice as an attorney in Eastern Oregon.

Both categories — those in full-time farming and those with off-farm careers — participate in the family board and council, contributing their skills and knowledge to the farm.

Sharing responsibility among the family members has kept the business in its best shape, said Corey, though it has demanded “a great deal of coordination and communication.”

‘Wool was king’

Early in the farm’s history, Cunningham Sheep Co. had about 25,000 sheep, and the farm has a long history of selling its wool exclusively to Pendleton Woolen Mills.

“Back then, wool was king,” said Glen Krebs, the farm’s lead shepherd.

As markets changed through the decades, Cunningham Sheep Co. whittled down its flock — the farm now keeps about 4,000 ewes, plus rams and lambs — and expanded into other commodities.

In the 1960s, the family added cattle and now raises 1,200 cow-calf pairs annually. The family also diversified by adding wheat, timberland and a hunting operation called Hunt Oregon LLC.

Since the 1950s, the farm has increased its acreage by 60% to 80%.

Steve Corey showed the Capital Press a map of the family’s holdings: private land, timberlands and federal grazing lands extending across Umatilla County and parts of Morrow and Union counties. Corey estimated the farm is larger than 75,000 acres.

Although the farm now produces a diverse mix of livestock, wheat and timber, many locals still know Cunningham Sheep Co. best for what gave the farm its name: sheep.

Fine-wooled Rambouillets

Wool remains a major part of the farm 149 years after Cunningham started the business.

The Coreys and Levys raise Rambouillet sheep, a large, white-faced breed that produces fine wool soft enough to be worn next to the skin.

“Shearing is a busy time,” said Krebs.

The lead shepherd ascended a ramp to the upper story of a barn lined with shearing stations.

Annually, he said, the farm pays a shearing contractor to bring in several shearers.

Shearing is fast-paced. Shorn sheep are guided down chutes resembling slides at a park, while handlers classify the wool’s quality before it’s mechani-



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Oswaldo, a shepherd at Cunningham Sheep Co., marks sheep with chalk-paint.

cally stuffed into bags.

When Krebs was growing up, his family stuffed round burlap bags, often 7-1/2 feet tall, with wool manually rather than mechanically.

“When I was little, they’d throw me in a bag and I’d have to work my way out,” said Krebs.

He chuckled. Krebs is not part of either the Levy or Corey side. The family hired him because he has a lifetime of industry knowledge; Krebs’ family also runs an Eastern Oregon sheep business.

The farm hired Krebs in 2013 after their former Basque lead shepherd, Juan Erice, retired.

To the mill

Once wool is bagged, it’s shipped to Pendleton Woolen Mills.

The mill and farm have a longstanding relationship built on trust. For decades, the mill has committed to buy the farm’s wool at the best price it can afford to offer. Pendleton’s wool buyer does a visual inspection, talks with the farm about the year’s clip and negotiates a price.

“If you want to call it a handshake relationship, you can call it that,” said Dan Gutzman, who manages Pendleton’s wool buying department. “But it’s one that’s withstood the decades.”

Corey, of Cunningham Sheep Co., said Pendleton Woolen Mills has been loyal, buying the farm’s wool even during difficult years.

Many factors drive the international wool market. Tariffs, disease outbreaks, drought and shipping congestion all impact pricing.

Pendleton Woolen Mills consumes about 2.4 million scoured pounds of wool annually — 40% from domestic growers, 60% from overseas — and Cunningham is one of its longest-standing suppliers.

Wool, however, isn’t the farm’s main money-maker. More profit comes from selling meat and breeding stock.

Registered, commercial flocks

Twilight lapped across the hills like a quiet tide near Pilot Rock, south of Pendleton.

Krebs, with help from a Border collie, led a pair of 300-pound rams through a gate.

These rams belonged to the farm’s registered flock, composed of sheep with fine wool and white faces that meet Pendleton’s wool standards.

Each year, Krebs said, he sells about 100 top-quality rams as breeding stock.

Animals that don’t meet the standards are in a commercial flock, many of which end up as meat.

Krebs keeps track of each animal’s pedigree with electronic ear tags, which the farm started using four years ago. He said the tags provide him with data for targeted breeding.

Plus, Krebs said, he anticipates the meat market is moving toward consumers demanding more traceability — tracking with ear tags which animals have received antibiotics, for example.

“Traceability is coming,” said Krebs. “We’re trying to get ahead.”

The sheep business’ main profit comes from selling lamb through Stan Boyd, based in Eagle, Idaho, the farm’s broker for the Rocky Mountain Sheep Marketing Association.

Krebs said he’s pleased

that demand for lamb is on the rise.

“I’m really optimistic,” said Krebs.

He was interrupted by an uproar of dogs barking.

Cunningham Sheep Co. has about 40 farm dogs, each with different roles — working, herding, guarding — across a range of breeds including Border collies, Turkish Kangal shepherds and Great Pyrenees.

Some of the dogs protect sheep from predators.

Main challenges

Predator pressure is one of the main challenges the farm faces.

Last year alone, the farm had 17 confirmed sheep kills and two dog injuries from wolves. Those were just the confirmed cases. According to Corey, “It’s tough to get a wolf predation confirmed.”

The family says the farm is affected by the state’s decisions on wolf management.

“It’s not us making those rules. We just live and deal with them as best as we can,” said Corey.

To repel wolves, the farm has increased its number of guard dogs.

Krebs said the dogs take different roles. Some chase. Others bark. Yet others remain close to the sheep. Krebs said he doesn’t assign the dogs their roles; they decide.

“It’s like they have a coffee every morning and say, ‘You go here, I’ll go



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

A grain elevator bears the name of the family-run Cunningham Sheep Co. at its headquarters in Nolin.

there,” Krebs said with a laugh.

The farm faces other challenges, too: the economy’s unpredictability, environmental regulations, the ongoing agricultural labor shortage and concern over the new farmworker overtime pay law.

Despite the challenges, Krebs said he’s fortunate to have a team of about six H-2A migrant guest workers who follow the sheep on the range.

“We’ve got a terrific team, couldn’t have better,” said Krebs. “They’re just go-getters.”

Lambing barn

The next morning, Corey, Krebs, the herders and a veterinary student met at the lambing barn in Nolin, between Pendleton and Echo.

Beside the farm’s Nolin headquarters, the Umatilla River, brown from rainstorms, meandered past cottonwoods and hills that buckled into each other.

In the river valley stood a grain elevator and nearby, the lambing barn.

According to the Oklahoma State University Extension Service, when Rambouillets lamb, only 20% to 35% have twins.

This spring, Cunningham Sheep Co. birthed between 4,500 to 4,800 lambs out of 3,800 ewes — a good rate considering the breed and last year’s drought.

Inside the barn, Leah Swannack, a Washington State University veterinary student doing a mixed-animal rotation at the farm, was moving between jugs — stalls holding a single ewe and her young — checking their health.

The Coreys and Levys said they’re inten-

tional about surrounding themselves with good veterinarians.

While Swannack did health checks, guest workers labeled ewes and lambs with colored chalk-paint: blue for singles, red for twins. The farm also uses letters with different meanings: for example, “A” for “ayuda,” Spanish for “help,” painted on a lamb needing attention.

Even bummer lambs have their own warm, clean space with individual pens. Krebs jokingly calls this “The Hilton.”

With such a large operation, it’s crucial to be organized, he said.

The future

With younger faces on the family board and council, Corey said he looks forward to seeing how the farm innovates in the future.

Younger family members have bounced around ideas that may take shape, including harvesting more of the farm’s timber, acquiring a small lumber mill and buying more land to expand pheasant hunting. Young family members have also talked about marketing lamb differently, with more direct sales under a brand name such as “Cunningham Lamb.”

At this point, those ideas are still just that: ideas. But as new generations of the family take leadership, Corey anticipates the farm will adapt with the times.

In the meantime, consumers continue to see the farm’s ripple effects far and wide: at the grocery store, on the landscape and woven into cloth in Pendleton Woolen Mills’ 35 retail stores.

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