

Oregon

Oregon's agricultural technology startups receive funding focus

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Oregon's high-tech "islands" — Portland, Eugene and Corvallis — are surrounded by agriculture, and a Portland nonprofit that steers funding to startup companies believes the state is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between them.

The need to feed, house and clothe a world population of 9 billion by 2050 will strain global systems of soil, water and energy, and is among the forces that have made agricultural technology a hot investment, said officials with Oregon BEST. The nonprofit, primarily funded by state government, will take that message to legislators in Salem next week in advance of the Precision Farming Expo.

Oregon BEST links a network of 250 university faculty members and their research facilities with clean-tech entrepreneurs who need help getting a business off the ground. Increasingly, President and Executive Director David Kenney said, the organization finds itself working with startups that blend technology and agriculture.

Oregon BEST has invested \$780,000 in eight ag tech startups in recent years, which the companies have used to secure an additional \$3.8 million in funding.

One of the companies funded by Oregon BEST is Rogue Rovers, and Ashland, Ore., company that is developing



Courtesy of Melissa Brandao

Rogue Rovers CEO and founder Melissa Brandao is developing an electric ATV for orchard and vineyard use. Her company received startup funding from Oregon BEST.

an electric ATV for use in orchards and vineyards. The vehicle, called the FarmDogg, will have options for carrying implements and will be capable of collecting and communicating field data — and of operating without a driver. Oregon BEST provided a \$25,000 commercialization grant to the company and to the Oregon Institute of Technology in 2014. Students studying mechanical engineering, software development and robotics are involved in the project.

Rogue Rovers founder and CEO Melissa Brandao said the team has assembled a prototype and is demonstrating it to farmers and refining the design. Vehicles will be assembled in Ashland, she said.

Other companies Oregon BEST has funded include HoneyComb Corp., which makes unmanned drone aircraft for agricultural use; Walking Point Farms, which makes biochar seed coatings and soil amendments; and SupraSensor Technologies, which developed wireless sen-



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Oregon BEST President David Kenney, left, and Commercialization Director Ken Vaughn say ag tech startups have emerged as a funding focus for the non-profit.

sors to monitor nitrate fertilizer levels in the soil.

Kenney said the message for legislators is that developing agricultural technology is a big economic opportunity for Oregon over the next five to 10 years.

"The goal is to raise awareness to pursue ag as a hub of innovation," he said.

Ken Vaughn, Oregon BEST's commercialization director, said several broader trends are emerging, including the re-use of ag and forest waste material. Agricultural and forest residue can be used for fuel, an Oregon company called EcNow Tech makes compostable dinnerware from bioplastics, and dairies capture methane gas to produce electricity, he noted. "It all starts with ag waste or forest waste," he said.

Farmers say transmission line must go around

By GEORGE PLAVEN
EO Media Group

Umatilla County, Ore., wants no part of a proposed transmission line stretching 305 miles from Boardman to near Boise, which residents say will interfere with farming and recreation without offering any benefit in return.

Or, if there's no other alternative, the project should at least follow Interstate 84 which is already a suitable route, according to draft comments by Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock.

The public had until March 19 to weigh in on a draft environmental impact statement for the Boardman to Hemingway Transmission Line Project, which would cross five Eastern Oregon counties to share a reliable source of electricity between the Columbia Basin and southwest Idaho.

Approximately 50 miles of the project would run through Umatilla County. More than 20 local farmers and property owners gathered during a public hearing Feb. 17 to speak out against the line and its developer, Boise-based Idaho Power Co.

Based on that hearing and meetings with the Umatilla County Planning Commission, Murdock has drafted comments on behalf of the county which the board of commissioners was to review.

In his comments, Murdock said the majority of people who testified at the public hearing opposed the project.

"They are deeply concerned that, rather than following existing corridors, it will disturb some of the most pristine recreation land in Umatilla County as well as high-value farmland," Murdock told the *East Oregonian*.

The planning commission as far back as 2008 had also expressed its goal is to consolidate, not add, power lines. If the Boardman to Hemingway line cannot find a route that avoids Umatilla County, the commission said it should stick along I-84 to avoid disrupting farms — the foundation of the area's economy.

Released by the Bureau of Land Management in December, the Boardman to Hemingway draft environmental impact statement divides the project into six segments and analyzes a number of route alternatives. It is not a final decision-making document.

Segment 1, or the Morrow-Umatilla segment, looks at where the line will connect at one end near Boardman and make its way down into the Treasure Valley. Farmers in particular are worried about one variation of the route that would run lines along the east side of Bombing Range Road, avoiding the Naval Weapons Systems Training Facility but interfering with agricultural land owned by Hale Companies, River Point Farms and the Boardman Tree Farm.

Don Rice, director of operations at the 24,000-acre tree farm, said the lines there would run approximately 16 miles, taking out at least 30 acres per mile of irrigated ground.

Oregon bills spark debate on daylight saving time

By JONATHAN J. COOPER
Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — The twice-a-year ritual of resetting clocks would come to an end under two bills introduced in the Oregon Senate.

A Senate committee held a brief discussion of the issue last week, but it did not vote on the bills.

The idea has cropped up in more than a half-dozen statehouses, but it's generated more talk than action. In Oregon, there was no sign that lawmakers seemed ready to depart from the other two states in the Pacific time zone.

Still, the proposal invited dozens of emailed comments from constituents to lawmakers.

"A great number of people have written in saying, 'We should just abolish this. We don't need to have this archaic practice any longer,'" said Sen. Kim Thatcher of Keizer, a Republican who sponsored one of the bills on behalf of a constituent. "There are also a lot of people on the other side of the issue saying, 'I would miss daylight savings time.'"

Time-change lovers say it would be chaotic for Oregon to depart from its West Coast neighbors, with which it shares the strong economic and cultural ties, making it more difficult to commute or plan meetings.

Trial lawyers oppose agritourism proposal

Bill would shield farms from some lawsuits

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — A proposal to shield agritourism in Oregon from some lawsuits has drawn the ire of trial attorneys, who claim the legislation would insulate negligent farmers from liability.

Under Senate Bill 341, growers would not be held legally responsible for deaths or injuries resulting from the "inherent risks" of agritourism, including dangers associated with the land, livestock, equipment and structures, as long as they post a warning to visitors.

The legislation would not apply to farmers who fail to inspect their property and equipment for hazards or who exhibit "wanton or willful disregard" toward visitors or intentionally harm them.

Friends of Family Farmers and the Oregon Farm Bureau claim the bill will encourage agritourism in Oregon because currently few companies are willing to insure such operations.

"If you can get your operation insured, you might have to pay a very high price to do so. This ultimately presents a real obstacle to success," said Ivan Maluski, policy director of Friends of Family Farmers.

More than 20 states have enacted similar laws over the past decade and the proposal mirrors language already on the books in Oregon that shelters equine facilities from liability, supporters argue.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Peter and Carin Sherman help their children pick out pumpkins at a farm on Sauvie Island near Portland, Ore. A bill to shield farms from some liability from agritourism is being considered by Oregon lawmakers but is opposed by trial lawyers.

By reducing the risk to insurance providers, the bill aims to stimulate competition among companies and drive down rates for farmers, Maluski said.

The bill marks the "next step" for agritourism in Oregon after lawmakers passed legislation in 2011 that allows such activities on land zoned for exclusive farm use, he said during a March 11 infor-

mational meeting on SB 341 before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"There is a history of the legislature looking at this issue and finding ways to promote agritourism activities," Maluski said.

The Oregon Trial Lawyers Association, however, believes SB 341 and other "immunity bills" force the victim of negligence to bear

the cost of injuries instead of the wrongdoer.

"They protect people from the consequences of their bad behaviors," said Derek Johnson, a member of OTLA's board of governors.

If insurance rates for agritourism are high, that reflects a risk that farmers and not the public should bear, he said.

Trade groups and professions frequently believe they should be immunized from lawsuits because they do "good work," but the civil justice system is meant to encourage people to behave responsibly, he said.

If lawmakers wanted to reduce fuel use, they would still not contemplate absolving owners of hybrid cars from liability for accidents, Johnson said.

Nor would they protect farm suppliers who sell defective seeds because they're organic, he said.

These examples point to the "absurdity" of immunity bills, Johnson said. "They pervert the incentives to act reasonably."

Farm structures are subject to relaxed building codes, while hay rides and "pumpkin guns" pose greater dangers than merely slipping in the mud, said Arthur Towers, political director for OTLA.

During a work group convened after a similar bill was proposed in 2013, a representative of the insurance industry said that rates for agritourism are set nationally and wouldn't be affected by an Oregon bill providing immunity for agritourism, he said.

The work group's discussions were positive but ultimately did not overcome such problems, Towers said.

"At the end of the day, we weren't able to reach consensus about how to move forward," he said.

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