

# Study: Oregon farmland value increased despite restrictions

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

A subdivision spills down a hillside southeast of Portland. The pasture in the foreground is next for development at 10 houses per acre. A new study says Oregon farmland value increased as cities developed within their urban growth boundaries.

A report by a Portland land-use advocacy group suggests Oregon farmland might be the best investment of the past 50 years.

The American Land Institute (ALI) says the growth of farmland market value outperformed the stock market from 1964 through 2012, increasing 5.5 percent above the Standard & Poor's 500 index.

Overall, Oregon farmland market value increased 1,770 percent, while the S&P increased 1,567 percent.

In addition, farmers since 1974 have benefited from \$5.75 billion in reduced property taxes, according to the ALI report.

The report, "Farm Zoning and Fairness in Oregon 1964-2014," is intended as a defense of Oregon's statewide land-use

"It really goes to show the strength of Oregon agriculture as an economic element of the state," Johnson said. "During the last recession it was one of the few bright spots in the Oregon economy."

Johnson said the increase in farmland value gives farmers greater borrowing power, just as home value can be used to leverage loans.

The report authors, Henry Richmond and Timothy Houchen, maintain Oregon's system has done what it was intended to do: Preserve large blocks of agricultural land and prevent cities from sprawling onto prime farm and forest land.

The findings are significant because the enduring complaint about Oregon's land-use system is that it unfairly limits development options in rural areas.

The primary goal of Senate

Bills 100 and 101, passed in 1973, was to stop cities from sprawling onto productive resource land. The laws mandated that cities adopt urban growth boundaries — lines beyond which most development isn't allowed — and zoned large blocks of land for exclusive farm use. That meant subdivisions couldn't spring up in the middle of agricultural land.

Legislators adopted a "carrot and stick" approach. In return for limited development options, farm and forest property is taxed at a reduced rate.

"So, yes, farmers live with continuing restrictions on the use of their land. And, yes, urban and suburban taxpayers pay imperceptibly higher property taxes," Richmond said in a news release accompanying the updated report.

But farmers benefit from

the tax laws and all Oregonians benefit "from the nearby beauty and profitability of Oregon's magnificent working rural landscape," he said.

Richmond was the founder and first director of 1000 Friends of Oregon, and is ALI's executive director. Houchen is ALI's economist and land use policy analyst.

Oregon voters have defeated seven attempts to repeal and land-use law.

Johnson, of the state ag department, said he has a couple key concerns about the continued viability of farmland.

Cities are filling up their urban growth boundaries, he said, and are looking to expand. He said the state also must be wary of the cumulative impact of allowing non-farm uses on ag land, including production lost to such things as wetlands mitigation and aggregate mining.

# Good Friday freeze worries orchard managers in SW Idaho

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

CALDWELL, Idaho — A Good Friday freeze was bad news for fruit orchards in Southwestern Idaho.

Fruit trees in the Treasure Valley area bloomed two to three weeks early this year because of an unusually warm winter and were susceptible to temperatures that dropped well below freezing on April 3.

"We lost a substantial amount of bloom ... on certain farms,"

said Chad Henggeler, field manager for Henggeler Packing Co. in Fruitland. "We're hoping most varieties come out OK but we are definitely concerned about some varieties."

Henggeler said the Good Friday freeze counted as two strikes against fruit orchards in the region and "one more freeze would probably take us out for this year."

Jamie Mertz, co-owner of Symms Fruit Ranch in the Sunny Slope area near Caldwell, said temperatures dropped to as low

as 22 degrees in some places on April 3.

"I have a few orchards that really got nailed," he said.

He said bloom is 2 1/2 to 3 weeks early for most fruit.

"Whenever the bloom is early like that ... they're more susceptible to a freeze," he said.

Now orchardists will spend the rest of the spring hoping temperatures don't drop below freezing again, said Michael Williamson, manager of Williamson Orchards in the Sunny Slope area.

"We just want it to stay above 32 degrees," he said. At this point in the growing season, "Anything below freezing makes us stay awake at night."

Fruit growers are also concerned about the impacts a four-day stretch of record low temperatures in mid-November had on fruit trees in the region.

Temperatures fell below zero in many areas and it was the suddenness of the temperature drop, before many trees had a chance to build up cold hardiness, that has fruit growers con-

cerned, said Mertz.

"It went from 60 degrees to zero in (a few) days," he said. "They just didn't have a chance to go dormant for the winter."

Mertz said his company cut a lot of wood open over the winter to try to assess the impact of the November cold and there is some damage to the vascular tissue.

# Wilbur-Ellis given OK to fly Oregon-made ag drone

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press

Wilbur-Ellis, one of the country's prominent ag service and supply companies, has received FAA approval for commercial use of a drone manufactured in Oregon.

The company will fly the AgDrone, made by HoneyComb Corp. of Wilsonville, 20 miles south of Portland. The company, started by three young entrepreneurs from small Oregon towns, makes a battery-powered winged drone equipped with visual and spectral-imagery cameras that can map fields and spot crop problems. Wilbur-Ellis spokeswoman Sandar Gharib said the company doesn't have immediate plans for widespread drone use, but is testing the technology. In a prepared statement, technology Vice President Mike Wilbur said the company has an "over-



Courtesy of HoneyComb Corp.

The AgDrone, shown in flight, is manufactured by a Wilsonville, Ore., company. It uses dual cameras to collect field data and map crop problems. Wilbur-Ellis, an ag services company, won permission from the FAA to use the drone commercially.

all mission to explore the role that emerging technologies can play in precision farming."

Ben Howard, HoneyComb's software engineer and one of the original three partners, said Wilbur-Ellis bought one drone and will use it first in South Dakota.

"It's good validation to have a big company like Wilbur-Ellis pick it up," Howard said. "To have their stamp of approval really helps."

In the past year, HoneyComb has moved from start-up space at Portland State University to a manufacturing and office site in Wilsonville, and it now has 16 employees.

The drone costs \$15,000, and the company provides one year of data processing for \$6,000. The latest model has a Kevlar exo-skeleton. It comes with a carrying case and is intended to be tossed in the back of a pickup, taken to a field and

launched. According to HoneyComb, its sensors feed into a cloud-based processing system and generate plant stress or other maps within minutes.

Howard said Wilbur-Ellis will use the AgDrone to scout fields and generate chemical prescription maps based on plant health. Applicators will be able to target only the sections of fields that need attention.

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