

Editorials are written by or approved by members of the Capital Press Editorial Board.

All other commentary pieces are the opinions of the authors but not necessarily this newspaper.

Opinion

Editorial Board

Publisher
Mike O'Brien

Editor
Joe Beach

Managing Editor
Carl Sampson

opinions@capitalpress.com

Online: www.capitalpress.com/opinion

OUR VIEW

Agriculture, technology offer huge economic potential

Idaho officials want to make Idaho the Silicon Valley of agricultural technology, a place where cutting edge ideas lead to good-paying off-farm jobs for the state's young people.

It's a good idea.

Idaho Department of Commerce Director Jeff Sayer says investment in agricultural technology has skyrocketed in recent years — \$150 million in 2012, \$1.8 billion in 2014.

"There's no reason that capital can't come to Idaho," he said.

"Idaho has unique assets and if we pull them together, they have a critical mass that would get the world's attention."

He makes his case by noting there's already a lot going on in Idaho, both in the public and private sectors.

- The Idaho National Laboratory is studying ways to help the dairy industry utilize animal waste.

- Idaho's state universities and research stations are conducting research on a host of topics, including unmanned aerial

vehicles, "big data" and sensor technology.

- National dairy companies are moving global research centers to Idaho.

"We've got to somehow bring all of this (expertise) together under a coalesced ag tech umbrella ... so that we can put it on display for the rest of the world and be part of this wave that's sweeping the nation," Sayer said.

Agriculture is big business in Idaho.

Idaho farmers produce the

second-highest net farm income in the West. The state has a robust processing industry. It makes sense to build on that by developing a supportive high tech industry that can employ engineers, researchers and skilled manufacturing workers.

And not just in Idaho.

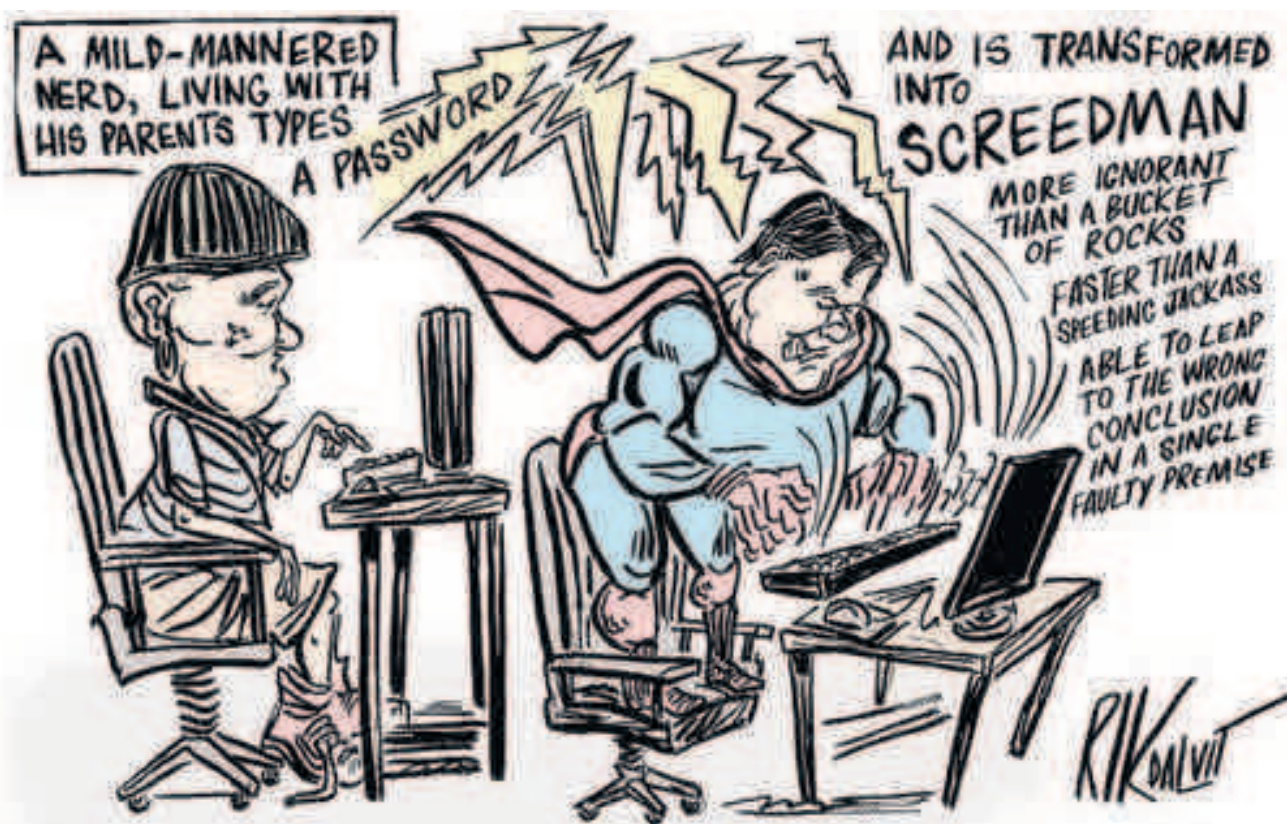
Big things are happening throughout the Northwest, and opportunities abound.

A tightening labor market increases the need for viable mechanized pickers for the fruit

industry. Ongoing water shortages will be addressed by more sophisticated irrigation techniques and equipment.

Agriculture faces a number of challenges, and more advanced technology is the answer. At the same time, the region has seen traditional natural resource jobs wane.

There are rewarding careers awaiting the young people of the Northwest if the public and private sectors can help facilitate a focused effort to develop this new industry.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

OUR VIEW

Telling ag's story up-close and personal

The Wild West world of social media provides more heat than light to the online discussion of agriculture. Rare is the discussion about farming or ranching that doesn't attract a high-voltage rant based on ignorance, some political agenda or flat-out falsehood.

That's too bad, because there really is a lot to talk about.

Last week, the Ag Chat Foundation had its regional meeting near Spokane, Wash. The speakers talked about what they do — write about food and agriculture — and encouraged those in attendance to join the conversation. Their counsel was to tell their story and not get into a verbal wrestling match with the skunks that lurk online looking for a fight.

That's sage advice. These days, the skunks seem to outnumber everyone else online. Even the most straightforward expression of fact will draw a screed personally attacking the author.

Such is the nature of 21st century "communications."

We've long favored

communicating with members of the ag community and the public at large. That's what we do. Our printed newspaper and our online website allow folks from all walks of life to learn about farming and ranching and the many issues that face agriculture.

We also encourage bloggers and other pro-farming folks to tell their stories in a personal and factual way.

But we also support another means of helping the public understand farming — up-close and personal. A couple of weeks ago in Salem, Oregon Ag Fest gave about 18,000 children and their parents and grandparents a glimpse of the wonders of agriculture. From a petting zoo to hands-on workshops, many exhibits and activities allowed young and old to meet farmers and ranchers and learn about what they do, and why.

As much could be learned standing around petting a sheep and asking questions of a nearby 4-H or FFA member as could be learned anywhere online.

Agriculture is a miracle. Coaxing plants from the rich earth, helping a

new calf that's just taken its first breath — this is what attracts farmers and ranchers to a profession and lifestyle that is fulfilling in so many ways. The only way to understand that is to witness it first-hand.

Other efforts to inform the public about agriculture include the Oregon Agri-Business Council's Adopt-a-Farmer program, in which school children visit farms and learn about agriculture directly from farmers; county and state fairs; and farmers' markets, roadside stands, U-pick operations and pumpkin patches. All of them add up to memorable experiences that help the public understand agriculture in a personal way.

There's no single answer to addressing the noisy critics that clog the Internet with their snide comments, rude insults and astounding displays of ignorance. If you took that away from them, they would have nothing.

The best thing farmers and ranchers can do is to open their doors to the vast majority of the public, who are genuinely interested in farming and ranching and how their food and fiber are produced.

Let's discuss water honestly

By PAUL WENGER
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Paul Wenger



California farmers are innovative, productive, knowledgeable — and now, a target for editorial writers, public policy think tanks, professors and talk-radio demagogues all around the country. Why? For daring to use water to grow food during the California drought.

Even though the drought has been hammering farmers for four years, many people — including many Californians — really started taking notice on April 1, when Gov. Jerry Brown imposed 25 percent water reductions on cities and towns. There was no similar requirement for agriculture, as the governor explained, because farmers have already endured significant, mandatory water cuts. Those cuts have rippled across rural California — land idled, people thrown out of work, communities suffering.

But criticism of California farms came fast and furious. A lot has been written about how farmers insist on growing "water guzzling" crops. Almonds, alfalfa and rice seem to be singled out most often.

Vitriolic and discouraging as the criticism has been, it has at least gotten people around the country thinking again about California's outdated water system and the way water is used. Farmers welcome that discussion. But let's have an honest discussion.

That discussion can't be honest unless it accounts for all the water used. That means discarding the old bromide, "Agriculture uses 80 percent of California's water." It's a dishonest representation, intended to incite discontent.

An honest discussion of California water use would include the significant proportion dedicated to environmental purposes. State officials agree that in an average year, 50 percent of surface water from rain and snow goes to environmental purposes, 40 percent toward growing food and farm products, and 10 percent for urban needs. These numbers will vary in any particular year, but correctly managed and stored, there's plenty of water to meet all needs, even during extended drought.

As a farmer, I can account for how much food I produce with the water I have: the amount of "crop per drop." Municipal water managers can also account for the water they provide to their customers. But those who "manage" environmental water have no such ability or requirement to account for the effectiveness of those flows.

Regardless of the figure we assign to agricultural water use, the real point is that farmers devote water to growing food. Food and water are the most fundamental needs of society, upon which the rest of the economy is built.

That leads us to a second statistic being used as a weapon these days: "Agriculture accounts for only 2 percent of the gross state product." This one is usually coupled with the "80 percent" figure to allow for a double-damning of agricultural water use.

When pundits or professors throw that stat around, they don't say what sector of the economy would be more deserving of the water. What is a more important use of water than growing food? Not "more valuable," in terms of dollars and cents; by that measure, every major-league professional athlete is more valuable to society than every kindergarten teacher. No, what's more important?

There are few industries that are truly essential to maintain life. Agriculture is one of them. There are few if any places in the world with the combination of climate, soil, water and know-how needed to grow food with the efficiency, care and stewardship that occur in California.

Any discussion of water also has to include how we add to the existing supply through new storage, more recycling, more desalination.

It's time to start having that honest discussion about how to address California's water problems.

Paul Wenger is president of the California Farm Bureau Federation.

Advancing county payments not a simple job

By MIKE CRAPO
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Mike Crapo



Extending Secure Rural Schools and Self-Determination Act (SRS) payments and fully funding Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) is not a simple undertaking, especially considering the federal government's overspending problem. However, when the federal government took over millions of acres of lands across our nation, it also took on the responsibility for the impact of federal ownership on local communities. The federal government can, and must, meet its responsibility within its budget.

A provision that would set

the stage for renewal of the SRS program and fully fund PILT was included as a part of the Senate budget framework that cleared the U.S. Senate and is being considered in a joint Senate-House conference committee, on which I am serving. As a member of the Senate Budget Committee, I supported the inclusion of amendments to the budget resolution that remove procedural hurdles within the budget framework to facilitate SRS renewal and fully fund PILT, while making explicit the need to increase timber harvest

to render such payments unnecessary in the future. Additionally, with my support, the Senate passed HR 2 that includes the restoration of critical payments for rural counties, and work continues to ensure that the assistance is restored without adding to our mounting national debt.

Property taxes fund county governments, allowing them to provide basic public safety services and infrastructure maintenance for local communities. However, lands managed by the federal government cannot be taxed by local or state governments. To help offset losses to local governments from the presence of non-taxable lands, laws have been enacted that provide payments to offset the impact of the presence of non-tax-

able lands. PILT payments are received for lands managed by the U.S. Department of Interior. The U.S. Forest Service compensates counties through SRS payments.

The PILT program, established in 1976, provides crucial resources to nearly 1,900 counties in 49 states and 3 U.S. territories. A fully-funded PILT program helps to ensure that counties housing federally managed lands can continue to provide these essential services. Like PILT, rural counties rely heavily on the SRS program, an outgrowth of the 110-year-old requirement for the U.S. Forest Service to return a portion of its receipts to the states for use in counties where national forests are located, to provide

essential services to residents. These payments reach over 775 rural counties and 4,400 schools located near national forests throughout the country and support public schools, roads, forest health projects and other county projects.

Congress has acted a number of times to extend SRS and fully fund PILT, but these extensions have been short-term. The most recent extension expired, leaving rural communities across the nation wondering if they will be able to maintain needed services.

Rural communities should not be asked to exhaust their resources and plan under a cloud of uncertainty because they house federally managed, un-taxable lands. Until we are able

to increase timber harvests to render such payments unnecessary, we must uphold our obligation to these communities to assist with funding roads, schools and other critical services.

We have a lot more work ahead to ensure that this obligation is met. Ultimately, we need a long-term solution that provides a consistent mechanism for the federal government to meet its responsibilities while controlling federal overspending. The Senate-passed legislation is steps in the right direction. As Congress works to fund federal priorities, I will continue to press for it to meet its responsibility to rural Idaho communities.

Republican Mike Crapo represents Idaho in the U.S. Senate.