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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

In defense of Madonna and her farm

Madonna, the Queen of Pop, is a farmer. As with most of her ventures, her entry into agriculture is not without controversy.

There's a 24-acre plot next to the Material Girl's estate in the Hamptons, the chic enclave for the rich and famous at the outer end of New York's Long Island. She bought it for \$2.2 million.

Which would have been a steal in those environs, had local governments not purchased the development rights from the Grabowski family, who once grew potatoes there, in 2010 for \$10 million. The land

came with restrictions that keep Madonna from building, and require that the property be used for "production for commercial purposes of agricultural products."

Last year planning officials approved her plans to create a nursery, and recently crews have been planting Leyland Cypress, eastern white pines and Robusta juniper. That crop will reduce the tax bill on the parcel to less than \$2,300. If she has \$10,000 in sales over two years, the bill drops to under \$300.

So Madonna is a nursery operator and her neighbors don't like it.

According to the tabloids, critics around Suffolk County, including some farmers, think it's all a sham. They note that had the original owners sold the property with all rights in tact, the acreage would have sold for \$17.5 million and the tax bill would have been north of \$150,000 a year.

Madonna, they say, is stealing from local taxpayers — her fellow millionaires. Besides, they claim she isn't really planting a nursery, she's building a forest to block the view from the road to her estate.

Here we rise to Madonna's defense. These development

easements are a common tool that has become ever more popular in the West to keep land in farm or forest. The town made the original deal to keep the land from being sliced up for more mansions.

The Grabowski family accepted the town's offer and must have agreed with its goals. Whether she's an honest farmer or a wealthy star who can afford to guard her privacy, Madonna paid the family a bundle for a piece of land that came with some fairly restrictive covenants that prevent her from exploiting its true economic potential.

As long as all parties make their choice freely, we think these

types of deals are a perfect way for farmers to realize the value of their property while keeping it in some type of productive use.

One might legitimately argue that agriculture property tax breaks should go only to "real" farmers producing true commercial crops. We could go for that. But until then, Madonna and thousands of other landed gentry who meet the statutory requirements are entitled to whatever tax benefit their state allows.

A thin premise on which to base an editorial, but likely our only chance to feature Madonna on these pages.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

OUR VIEW

Agriculture driving economic development in Idaho

Anyone who needs proof that agriculture is growing the economy of the Pacific Northwest needed to look no further than Idaho's Magic Valley last week.

On June 23, PerforMix feed-supplement and livestock-nutrition company broke ground for a new processing plant in Rupert. The facility will produce liquid feed supplement for the dairy and beef cattle industries. It includes four separate buildings with tanks and a truck yard on 6.8 acres of the company's 10-acre site.

The plant will have a capacity for 100,000 tons of production annually and will employ 15 at maximum production, including five drivers through a partner trucking company, Ag Express.

The new facility represents significant investment, several millions of dollars. Operations are expected to begin in December or January.

The following day, WOW Logistics, a storage and distribution company that serves dairy manufacturers, broke ground in Jerome for a new 193,000 square foot ambient storage facility. Expected to

be complete in January, the facility will expand WOW's capacity at Jerome to nearly 626,000 square feet, including more than 82,000 square feet of refrigerated space.

The company expanded its Jerome facility in 2004 and 2008, operating as a public warehouse, or third-party logistics provider, for other regional dairy manufacturers as well, including Idaho Milk Products, Dairy Farmers of America, Darigold, and Brewster Cheese.

Officials estimate the expansion is valued at \$16 million.

These two projects join several new agribusiness facilities and expanded operations in the Magic Valley, including new investments from Chobani, Monsanto, Clif Bar, and Frulact Group and expansions by Glanbia, McCain Foods, Calva/Brewster, and WillTran.

Taken individually, any of these developments would be welcome. Together, they have had a huge impact on Idaho's economy.

New agribusiness and expansion in 2014 generated nearly \$800 million in capital investment and created nearly 5,000

jobs, according to the Southern Idaho Economic Development Organization.

The manufacturers building in Idaho are adding value to the region's agricultural production. Instead of exporting raw crops, added-value products such as Greek yogurt, cheese and french fries are made in Idaho and sold nationwide and internationally.

It only makes sense to build on what is already a success — agricultural production. And while other states are having some success in this area, Idaho agriculture, to borrow the words of state ag director Celia Gould, "is nothing short of outstanding."

It does seem to be coming together in Idaho. Tax and regulatory structures are agreeable to business. The cost of living is low. The state's leaders understand business and agriculture. Most members of the state Legislature have rural backgrounds or are farmers and ranchers.

Farmers and ranchers in Oregon and Washington have the same drive as their colleagues in the Gem State. The political leadership, however, could take a page out of Idaho's book.

Runaway lawsuits imperil environment

By VINCENT BUYS
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Vincent Buys

Washingtonians are fortunate to live in communities that value land and resource management, and take the impact of their environmental footprint seriously. We all have a vested interest in preserving our environment and protecting our natural resources. Realities of the current drought and wildfire season remind us of the need for efficient management.

In May, Congressman Tom McClintock, R-California, made claims during his opening statement before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands Oversight that appeals and "frivolous lawsuits" hinder the U.S. Forest Service from providing critical management services on federal lands. A similar issue has vexed our state, and was profoundly evidenced in last year's wildfire season in Eastern Washington. The impacts of litigation extends to other areas as well, such as salmon recovery, water resources, energy conservation and more.

Take the lawsuit filed last month against the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, tasked with protecting depleting juvenile salmon and steelhead populations listed under the Endangered Species Act, as an example.

Five conservation groups — including the Animal Legal Defense Fund, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Audubon Society of Portland — are suing in an attempt to halt a plan that would kill 11,000 cormorants in the Columbia River estuary.

Cormorants have surged from 100 mating pairs in 1989 to 15,000 in 2014, and are known to eat juvenile salmon swimming en route to the Pacific Ocean. The species is a direct threat to salmon recovery in the Pacific Northwest.

Killing thousands of animals in an effort to conserve others is never going to be palatable. Even project manager Robert Winters acknowledged the unsavory nature of this scenario. Salmon population recovery is a complicated endeavor re-

quiring agencies to meddle in a tangled, complex ecosystem that makes it difficult to identify any clear winners or losers.

The alternative is inaction; for as many groups that encourage a hands-off approach to conservation, there are just as many who prefer hands-on management.

Washington's own Department of Ecology spent nearly half of its 2013-15 \$9.5 million AGO budget, which includes attorney and paralegal costs, on litigation. More than \$1 million of that was spent on water resources litigation alone.

Among many conservation functions, Ecology seeks to manage water on a holistic level by maintaining instream flows, bolstering irrigation to support farming and agriculture, and navigating a complex and difficult-to-manage water rights system. The amount of time and resources spent on mounting litigation could, and should, be used instead to more effectively conserve and manage natural resources.

As the drought continues and wildfire season approaches, we are reminded of the need for efficient land and resource management. Because the conditions of our natural resources are constantly in flux, we must meet that vulnerability and unpredictability with sound management policies.

Despite their clear efforts to keep our environment healthy and sustainable, our natural resource management agencies are constantly juggling competing interests of environmentalists, conservationists, tribes, farmers and others. We cannot continue to tie the hands of agencies with costly litigation that hinders officials from protecting the natural resources we so desperately seek to preserve.

Litigation should not take precedent over sound policy and management, especially as our state faces critical natural-resource disasters.

Rep. Vincent Buys, R-Lynnden, serves as the ranking member on the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

Readers' views

Forest Service doesn't trust you

The U.S. Forest Service has sunk to a new low in Eastern Oregon. That is, they have decided that you are too dangerous a group of people to be informed as to what roads they plan to close in your mountains.

How do I know that? Because I have received a response telling me so.

They put out propaganda of how they want to engage with you on the national forest, but when I or anyone else requests

documents to engage, we are told we may cause "injury to the quality of the agency decision." Let me emphasize, we, the people of Eastern Oregon may cause injury because we received a document to educate ourselves with.

Much like the Mullahs' in the mosaics of Afghanistan, the U.S. Forest Service means to keep you ignorant as to what is going on around you. Communities and citizens are easier to control if they are kept from the truth of what's going on around them and the decisions a few

are making for the larger population.

See, you/we/I are too dumb, too backwards, too unenlightened to understand the complexities of such ecological process, or are we?

I have a college education in natural resource, I know that water flows downhill and that active management techniques play a greater role in meeting the public's needs than exclusion of use. I know that there is a "tread lightly" campaign being pushed by a small minority on the upper echelons of the U.S. Forest Service where

man is looked at as a disease on the landscape and not a part of it. But most importantly I know this. You and I are not dumb, backwards or unenlightened.

It's a lie, and we are dealing with liars in the leadership positions of the forest service, from the supervisor's office up. If you want to keep your mountains open you are going to have to dig in and fight. Are you willing to do that? I hope so, because your kids' and grandkids' right to access depends on it.

John George
Bates, Ore.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

Letters policy: Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters may also be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.