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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

New farmers accept the challenge of agriculture

Oregon has more than 5,000 farms that are 1 to 9 acres in size, and the flow of people interested in taking up the profession hasn't slowed.

That's a good sign, particularly as the average age of Oregon farmers continues to rise.

But beyond desire, neophyte farmers need a considerable skill set to turn a dream into an economically viable farming operation.

To that end, more than 175 prospective and beginning farmers took part in a one-day small farm school sponsored by Oregon State University's Center for Small

Farms and Community Food Systems.

Workshops included horse handling and emergency veterinarian care, tractor safety, soil testing, beekeeping and small engine basics, blueberry production, dryland vegetable farming, pasture management and more.

Garry Stephenson, director of the center, said the turnout for farm school was indicative of the continued intense interest, especially in urban areas, about where food comes from and how it's produced.

That interest can energize

agriculture as legions of baby boomer farmers near retirement age.

"We have a generation of people in their twenties and thirties who are interested in going into farming as a business and as a statement of how they see the world," Stephenson said. "One of the hopes we have is that they will eventually scale up and become medium-size farms."

We need more trained, experienced farmers who can take the place of aging farmers who will eventually retire.

Census figures show the average age of all farmers — those who

produced and sold, or normally could produce and sell, \$1,000 or more in agricultural products — in Oregon is 57.5 years.

In production agriculture, where the bulk of Oregon's farm value lies, the numbers skew older still. Of the 17,684 operators who list farming as their principal occupation, 10,600 — 60 percent — are 55 or older. Of those, 6,559 are 65 or older.

There are another 4,351 who list farming as their principal occupation who are between 45 and 54 years old. Added together, 84.5 percent of farmers are older than 45.

There are 4,746 farmers who produce sales of \$100,000 or more. Forty-nine percent of those farmers are at least 55, and nearly half of those are older than 65.

Even farmers wear out eventually, and each must be replaced by a younger man or woman.

Most large farms started out as smaller farms, and every established farmer was once a beginning farmer.

While not every farm must grow larger, a great place for an operator to learn how to manage a larger farm is to make viable a smaller farm.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

OUR VIEW

Forest management, wildfires and climate change

As firefighters struggle against the deadly plague of wildfires that has scorched the West this year, politicians are chiming in with their theories about what causes them.

California Gov. Jerry Brown thinks climate change is to blame. Other politicians agree, saying it caused the drought that has made the region more vulnerable to wildfires.

While drought certainly has contributed to the wildfire nightmare, other causes have played a larger role. The poor management of federal land, which has allowed forests to become overgrown and bulging with fuel for fires, is the primary cause of the increasing number of large wildfires.

This year alone, 3 million acres have burned in seven Western states. If Alaska is included, the area burned totals more than 8.1 million acres. For the years 2005 to 2014, an average of 6 million acres has burned annually in the U.S., mainly the West. Most of those 10 years predate the four-year drought in California or the droughts in any of the other Western states.

National forests are not parks. They should be open to grazing, recreation, commercial timber operations and other uses. That used to be the case. The U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management managed timber on a rotational basis, assuring a sustainable supply for lumber, plywood and paper mills.

Under the current administration,

however, those uses have been reduced, either as the result of lawsuits filed by environmental groups intent on evicting ranchers and others from the forests, or by the Forest Service, which is closing a large percentage of national forest access roads to public use. In Montana, for example, 9,000 miles of the 32,000 miles of national forest roads will be closed. Closing these massive areas to access assures that they will never be properly managed for multiple use or thinned to reduce wildfire fuel. They will become de facto wilderness areas — and stockpiles of fuel for wildfires.

Similar road closures are planned in other national forests in the West.

In the wake of this year's catastrophic fires, even the most hard-headed politicians seem to agree that the forests need to be "better-managed." We will translate: They need to be logged, either through thinning or through commercial timber sales. And more livestock grazing is needed to reduce the amount of vegetation that piles up as fuel for the next wildfire.

This is a statement of the obvious. The only answer to reducing the size and intensity of wildfires is to reduce the amount of fuel in the forests.

Near John Day, Ore., which has suffered through wildfire hell this year, retired BLM forester Bob Vidourek showed Capital Press reporter Sean Ellis the difference between forestland that had been

thinned and neighboring land that had not. The managed land was barely touched by the wildfire that roared through the area. The unmanaged land was devastated.

But there's more to the issue than managing publicly owned natural resources. Those who say they are concerned about climate change should also be interested in managing public land to minimize the number and size of wildfires.

The reason: Wildfires release massive amounts of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, which are linked to climate change. A study released this year by the National Park Service and the University of California-Berkeley found that wildfires were responsible for 5 to 7 percent of California's total carbon emissions between 2001 and 2010. Forests are carbon sinks, storing carbon in the form of wood fiber. When a wildfire burns the forest that carbon is released into the air as carbon dioxide.

That alone should convince everyone, no matter where they stand on the climate change issue, that public land needs to be well-managed, not locked up.

As it stands, poor management of public land and locking up vast tracts of national forests will ultimately destroy valuable publicly owned resources — and release more carbon dioxide that many believe exacerbates climate change.

More neonic research needed, not more restrictions

By MARK WAGONER
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Mark Wagoner



The most precious acres on my farm don't produce a single crop. Instead, they raise bees.

That's because I'm an alfalfa-seed grower — and without bees, our farm would go out of business.

I'd say that our bees are a lot like employees, except that they're more like family: We don't give them paychecks but we do provide food and shelter.

As the Environmental Protection Agency considers new regulations on pesticides in the name of aiding bees, the experience of our family farm may be instructive. It has helped me come to believe that instead of letting the misinformed passions of environmental lobbyists force us into banning safe and useful products, we should adopt regulations that both help bees thrive and enjoy the backing of responsible research.

The pesticides at the heart of the current controversy are called neonicotinoids, or "neonics" for short. They became popular in the 1990s, replacing other types of pesticides that appeared to have possibly adverse effects on birds and mammals.

In recent years, some people have argued that neonics hurt honeybees. The proof behind this claim is weak. Last year, the Washington State Department of Agriculture said that lack of forage and a parasite called the varroa mite pose much bigger threats to honeybee populations.

Moreover, wild-eyed claims that neonics cause "colony collapse disorder" — a phenomenon in which entire colonies of honeybees suddenly die — have not survived scientific scrutiny. As it happens, the global population of honeybees has been increasing for decades. In the United States, where it has suffered fluctuations, we've also seen improvements in recent years.

Even so, the European Union has imposed a moratorium on neonics — causing concern that the EPA may try to follow suit, even if scientific research and the experience of farmers suggests that neonics and bees can coexist.

I apply neonics on my farm. I'm not a major user of these products — other farmers depend on them much more than I do — but they are one of the tools I use to fight pests.

Killing bees is the last thing I want to do.

Bees are the opposite of pests. They're pollinators. Without their help, our alfalfa

plants would not produce seeds. And that's what I do for a living: produce the seeds that other alfalfa farmers will plant on their own land.

So for me, bees are an essential resource — just as important as water, soil and sunlight.

Our bees aren't honeybees, which are native to Europe but were brought to North America long ago. Instead, we rely on alkali bees, which are native to our region. They look similar to honeybees, with black and yellow stripes, but several of their behaviors are different. They don't sting, for example. Moreover, they don't build hives. Instead, they dig tunnels and live underground, preferably in salt flats.

To accommodate them, we've turned over large portions of our farm to the bees. We maintain "bee beds." The largest on our farm takes up 13 acres. We try to create ideal conditions for the bees, with a gentle system of sub-irrigation in the salty soil they love.

Millions of bees occupy each acre. It's possible to walk across these bee beds, but only with great care. Driving on them is strictly forbidden. It crushes their nests.

Our bees are a vital resource. Their homes may be the most valuable acres on our farm, in fact. If the bee beds were to disappear, we could not simply start over next year with new alkali bees. It would take years to rebuild their habitat.

So you can call me a farmer, but I'm also a beekeeper. And I think it would be a big mistake for the EPA to put new limits on neonics, especially when our best scientific data suggest that crops, bees and neonics can flourish together under proper management. This is certainly the result that I observe with my own eyes.

The policy that would benefit bees the most right now is not a new restriction, but rather new research. We already know a lot about bees, but there's still much to learn — and the more we learn, the better we'll balance what is already a strong and sustainable partnership.

Mark Wagoner is a third-generation farmer in Walla Walla County, Wash., where he raises alfalfa seed. He volunteers as a board member for Truth About Trade & Technology/Global Farmer Network, www.truthabouttrade.org.

Readers' views

More about

Wash. dairy case

What is going on with the Capital Press? In the past you have presented fact-based statements of opinion and well-reasoned ideas. Your Aug. 27 editorial statement, "Incremental attacks on agriculture continue," is a vicious attack on environmentalists without any support in reality.

People have a right to clean water and clean air. Local

government, Yakima County and Ecology looked the other way when school, municipal, church and private wells became polluted and or went dry because of factory dairy farms.

Well testing near one of the dairies in the federal lawsuit, CARE vs. Cow Palace, showed over 200 nitrates in their well. Three dairies had 43 lagoons. It has been proven all lagoons leak. Yet the dairies were supposedly following their best management prac-

tices with high praises from ag inspections?

There are over 300,000 factory farm cows in Yakima County — more cows than people. There is not enough land to put the manure on. Manure is not tested for pathogens or drugs. Dairies have made it legal to put their dead cows in the manure and call it organic. Yakima County had the case of "mad cow."

Many of the environmentalists in the Yakima Valley are

also farmers and depend on agriculture for a livelihood. Why should one highly subsidized industrial dairy industry be able to pollute, consume water over every other citizen's rights? This is not an effort to take over farms; this is an effort for all people to simply survive.

Next time, please interview impacted people besides industry mouthpieces trying to scare decent farmers.

Jan Whitefoot
Harrah, Wash.

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. E-mailed 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.