

Dairy will relocate to Boardman tree farm

Sale completed
in November

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

Nearly one-third of the massive Boardman Tree Farm has been sold to a local dairy that plans to move operations within the next year.

Willow Creek Dairy purchased 7,288 acres of the tree farm from Greenwood Resources in November. Owner Greg te Velde said the land he purchased runs along the property's southern boundary — out of view from Interstate 84 — near Finley Buttes Landfill.

Once trees have been removed from the property, te Velde said he will put in a center pivot to grow irrigated wheat, corn and alfalfa. His dairy currently raises about 8,000 cows and provides 70,000 gallons of milk per day to Tillamook Cheese at the Port of Morrow.

Te Velde lives in central California, and established Willow Creek Dairy in 2002 on land leased from Threemile Canyon Farms. The operation employs about 50 people.

"The whole community is great," te Velde said. "It's all about agriculture. It's really easy to do business here."

Te Velde purchased land, water rights and irrigation



EO Media Group file photo
Nearly one-third of the 25,000-acre Boardman Tree Farm is being sold to the Willow Creek Dairy.

equipment from the Boardman Tree Farm for \$65 million, according to documents

at the Morrow County Assessor's Office. Greenwood Resources has owned the

Boardman Tree Farm since 2007, totaling 25,000 acres of hybrid poplar trees that are grown in rotation and sold for sawlogs, pulp and biofuel. It takes 12 years before the trees fully mature.

Te Velde said he expects a measured transition from tree farm to dairy farm on the newly acquired land. Greenwood Resources did retain some options in the deal, depending on market conditions.

With any luck, te Velde said he could be moved within the next year.

"We'll have a little more control over our destiny," he said.

Don Rice, director of North American operations

for Greenwood Resources, did not comment on the long-term future of the tree farm. The area spans six miles along Interstate 84 and 13 miles to the south, and stands as a significant landmark for the region.

The tree farm includes roughly 6 million standing trees, and provides lumber to the Collins Companies' Upper Columbia Mill, which operates in conjunction with the Greenwood Tree Farm Fund. There is also a veneer mill owned by Columbia Forest Products that opened in 2013.

The Tree Farm also has hosted "A Very Poplar Run" since 2011, with 5K and 10K races to benefit the Agape House in Hermiston.



Kathy Aney/EO Media Group
Bins of fresh, organic peppers beckon shoppers at the Safeway store in Pendleton, Ore.

Organic groups welcome more research funding

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

Groups representing organic growers are pleased with USDA's announcement of \$17.6 million in funding to support organic research but say the burgeoning industry needs much more.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack said the available funding, through grants from the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative, is part of USDA's efforts to support organic producers as they respond to increasing consumer demand for organic products.

"We think it's just terrific, but it's just part of what we need to scale up organic production to meet the tremendous demand," said Cathy Calfo, executive director of California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF).

"Demand is sky high; we need more of this," she said.

Consumer demand for organic has really emerged in the last decade, and U.S. production is just catching up. The fact that USDA is taking note is "very positive," she said.

But more investment is needed for organic research, which has only received a small portion of USDA's \$1.1 billion research budget for 2015, unrepresentative of the 5 percent of U.S. food sales claimed by organic, she said.

"For us, any part of that is significant. In the overall budget, it's a very small part, less than a couple percent," she said.

With organic imports increasing, it's important to invest in U.S. organic now to be able to turn that around in the future, she said.

The Organic Trade Association agrees, stating it is pleased with USDA's announcement but organic research is still woefully underfunded.

"More organic research is critically needed to help organic agriculture grow in this country, and to give producers and all organic stakeholders more resources to help them make the best business decisions," OTA said in a written statement to the Capital Press.

"We appreciate USDA

Secretary Vilsack's pledge to foster organic production in the U.S., but more needs to be done. We will continue to advocate for more organic research funding and policies to increase those research dollars," OTA stated.

In that regard, the organization petitioned USDA this past spring for an organic check-off research and promotion program.

CCOF has also been engaged in organic research efforts, meeting with the dean of the University of California-Davis College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences earlier this year, asking her to devote more research to organic production, Calfo said.

Organic growers are requesting research that addresses plant production, pests and soil health. There needs to be more tools to improve organic farming, and research is an important tool, she said.

Jennifer Miller, food and farm programs director at the Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides, said USDA has provided important support for organic farming through several programs, initiatives and projects.

The center is also pleased to see continued emphasis on plant breeding for organic systems, she said.

Farmers rely on preventative practices for managing pests on organic farms, and seeds developed under organic conditions are better able to compete with weeds and resist pests and diseases, she said.

"Consumer demand for organic foods continues to show strong growth, so even greater investment is needed to help U.S. farmers meet this market opportunity," she said.

The purpose of the organic research and extension program is to fund high-priority research, education and extension projects that enhance the ability of producers and processors who have already adopted organic standards to grow and market high-quality organic products.

Project applications for the latest round of funding are due March 10. For more information, visit www.nifa.usda.gov.

E. Oregon farms step up organic acres

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

Eric Nelson knew it wouldn't be easy when he decided to go organic on his family's 900-acre wheat farm north of Pendleton.



Eric Nelson

Nelson, a fourth-generation farmer, talked it over with his father — former state Sen. David Nelson — who wondered how they would control weeds without herbicide, or how they'd afford organic fertilizer and still turn a profit. But Nelson had faith it would work, and in 2008 Nelson Grade Organics harvested its first organic crop.

"I'm very comfortable with what we have done, what we're doing and where we're going," Nelson said. "For me, I see no need to go back."

Overall, the number of organic farms has declined in Oregon between 2007 and 2012, yet total organic acres nearly quadrupled over that time, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Organic sales also rose from \$88 million to \$194 million in Oregon, making up 4 percent of all farms sales statewide. Nationally, the organic food industry made \$39 billion in 2015 — an 11 percent increase over the previous year.

Despite the demand, becoming an organic farm takes serious time and money. Fields cannot be sprayed with any prohibited chemicals for at least three years before they are certified organic. Without certification, products won't fetch the same kind of premium price at the market, which can be double or more, depending on the commodity.

Nelson said he had help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture getting started, but even that didn't help pay all the bills. Organic fertilizer costs up to twice as much as the conventional stuff, and managing weeds can become a real issue without being able to use herbicides.

To make it over the hump, Nelson said he had to get creative with his cropping systems. He uses spring grains such as mustard and barley to break up soil-borne diseases and replenish nutrients underground.

"We basically have to create our own nitrogen," he said.

Wheat is still the big money-maker on the farm, but Nelson recently started selling or-



Kathy Aney/EO Media Group

Produce manager Aaron Mitchell places stickers on apples Monday at the Pendleton, Ore., Safeway store, identifying them as organic.

ganic mustard seed to Barhyte Specialty Foods in Pendleton, Ore., as an additional source of revenue.

"Some years are tough, but we have made a profit. We're still surviving," he said.

A portion Nelson's wheat goes to Hummingbird Wholesale, a company in Eugene, Ore., that distributes dry organic goods to small independent grocery stores, restaurants and food processors.

General Manager Justin Freeman said most of the products they buy come from Western Oregon, but there is a growing interest among Eastern Oregon farmers in going organic. The key hurdle, he said, is supporting growers during that three-year transitional phase in certification.

"It's about finding solutions for people and getting risk out of the equation as much as possible," Freeman said.

In the past, Hummingbird Wholesale has purchased rice, beans and cranberries at premium organic prices from farmers who have started the process of certification. The goal is to win over more organic farms to keep up with demand, Freeman said.

A similar initiative for wheat has also been launched by Ardent Mills, of Denver, which hopes to double U.S. organic wheat acres by 2019. Oregon Tilth, a nonprofit organization that helps certify local organic farms, has also signed on as a partner.

Chris Schreiner, executive director of Oregon Tilth, said the growing demand for organic products is being driven in part by a renewed interest in food and earth-friendly farming practices.

From a grower standpoint, Schreiner said there is a tremendous opportunity for go-

ing organic, but recognizes it comes with risks.

"Their challenge is figuring out a new management system and accessing those new markets," Schreiner said. "We're committed to supporting them and helping them seize that opportunity in the marketplace."

One of Eastern Oregon's largest irrigated organic growers, Threemile Canyon Farms in Boardman, now has 7,800 acres in certified organic vegetables. General Manager Marty Myers said he hopes to grow that total to 12,000 acres over the next two years.

Threemile Canyon grows organic sweet peas, sweet corn, onions, carrots, potatoes and edamame, which are mostly sent to the farm's frozen foods plant in Pasco. Frozen products are sold primarily to Costco under the brand name Organic by Nature.

The farm also developed its first organic dairy earlier this year just east of Hermiston, with about 1,300 cows. Part of the requirement for an organic dairy is to let cows graze in pasture for at least 120 days of the year.

Myers said Threemile Canyon first dipped its toes in organic farming in 2002, using fertilizer generated from the farm's dairies. Without that in-house fertilizer source, Myers said they likely couldn't make the organic operation work.

Organic vegetables yield about 75 percent versus conventional methods, though Myers said premium prices make up for the hit. Growing organic means going back in time about 20 years in terms of production practices, he said. Sometimes, the only way to manage weeds is to pull them by hand.

"There are a lot of farmers who have tried it and didn't like it, for obvious reasons," Myers

said. "We feel we can be a low-cost producer. That gives us an advantage over a lot of other producers."

On a much smaller scale, Gus Wahner grows organic produce on about one-third of an acre in Stanfield, including tomatoes, basil, cucumber and garlic.

Wahner has been farming on and off for 30 years at his home, which he's named Way of Life Farms. Though not certified organic, he said the land hasn't been sprayed since 1970. He raises produce from the greenhouse to the hoop house, and made \$15,000 in profit last year.

Wahner, who serves on the Umatilla County Soil and Water Conservation District, is a longtime advocate of organic farming. He uses an aerobic system to brew his own compost "tea," which he sprays along with a mixture of fish, kelp, molasses and sea minerals to create healthy, organic soils.

"When people talk about organic, it needs to be biological," he said. "The whole essence of organic is improvement in the soil."

Wahner said he's not an environmentalist, but growing organic requires being in tune with nature. Spraying chemicals kills off components in the ground, he said, but organic farming is about working with nature to grow what you need.

The food is also healthier, he said, because it absorbs a greater host of micro-nutrients from the ground.

"I don't do farming to make money, necessarily. I do it for people to experience great food and be healthy," Wahner said.

Ten years after switching to organic, Nelson said they continue to make a living while preserving the legacy of their land.

Apple commission seeks voting method change

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — The Washington Apple Commission wants to modify how growers vote on major policies such as changing the assessments that fund it.

By state law, each grower gets one vote, but also gets one vote per acre, said Todd Fryhoyer, commission president.

It takes 60 percent of votes by grower, plus 60 percent of votes by acreage to pass proposals such as changing the 3.5-cent per box assessment that funds the commission, he said.

The commission is not contemplating changing the assess-

ment and plans to keep one vote per grower but believes the other part of voting should be based on the number of boxes packed instead of acreage, Fryhoyer said.

More fruit is grown per acre with newer, high-density plantings than is grown with older plantings of larger trees, he said. Therefore, it's more equitable to base the vote on boxes packed, he said.

It is also easier to track boxes packed through packing companies than to track acreage from growers, he said.

At a Dec. 10 commission meeting, commissioners agreed to seek that change through the state Legislature, he said.

State commission redesigns website

WENATCHEE, Wash. — The Washington Apple Commission has launched a redesigned website, www.bestapples.com, aimed at reaching millions of overseas consumers who rely on smart phones for information.

The site uses the tagline "The State for Apples," in English, and uses responsive design for optimized viewing on screens of all sizes.

"The goal is to make the content appealing and informative for our fans in the U.S. and foreign markets," said Rebecca Lyons, the commission's international marketing director.

Content is available in eight languages targeting consumers in Latin America, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Middle East.

The project was partially funded by a specialty crop grant through the state Department of Agriculture.

About one-third of Washington's apple crop is usually exported to more than 60 countries. The commission is a grower-funded organization that promotes Washington apples in international markets.

— Dan Wheat