

# Comments pour in about big E. Oregon dairy

By **GEORGE PAVLEN**  
EO Media Group

BOARDMAN, Ore. — The public will have another month to weigh in on a controversial new mega-dairy proposed at the former Boardman Tree Farm property.

More than 2,300 comments have already poured in to the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Department of Environmental Quality on the Lost Valley Ranch, an operation that would add 30,000 cows to the area and generate roughly 187 million gallons of liquid manure each year.

ODA and DEQ are responsible for registering the dairy as a confined animal feeding operation, or CAFO. But first, the agencies must approve a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Permit, which outlines how Lost Valley will manage wastewater and monitor for potential groundwater contamination.

A public hearing was held July 28 at the Port of Morrow, where a majority of people favored approving Lost Valley's permit application. Speakers included the project designer, local contractors and Marty Myers, general manager of neighboring Threemile Canyon Farms, which runs an even larger dairy with 70,000 cows.

"Sustainable agriculture is really what we're talking about here," Myers said during the hearing.



Capital Press File

Holstein cows rest at a dairy. The Oregon Department of Agriculture is taking comments on a proposal for a large dairy in Eastern Oregon.

However, the bulk of written comments oppose Lost Valley, arguing such large dairies have a negative impact on air and water quality. Wym Matthews, CAFO program manager for ODA, said the sheer number of comments they received was unprecedented.

"The agencies are bound to look at those comments and respond to them all," Matthews said.

The original public comment period ended Aug. 4, though it was reopened Monday at the request of the state Environmental Justice Task Force and will now run through 5 p.m. Friday, Nov. 4.

## Expanding operations

Lost Valley Ranch is proposed by California dairyman Greg Velde, who purchased 7,288 acres along the south-

ern boundary of the Boardman Tree Farm east of where Homestead Lane intersects with Poleline Road.

For 14 years, te Velde has run the Willow Creek Dairy on land leased from Threemile Canyon Farms, producing 70,000 gallons of milk per day for Tillamook Cheese at the Port of Morrow. Now, he wants to move and expand his operation, with more than triple the number of cows.

The application for Lost Valley Ranch includes an Animal Waste Management Plan, describing how waste will be managed on site. The plan calls for six main lagoons, adding up to 260 acre-feet of storage. All lagoons would have a double liner with leak detection to protect against material leaching into the groundwater.

The nitrogen-rich waste would then be recycled and

applied at agronomic rates — based on soil testing — to irrigate 5,900 acres growing animal feed, such as corn silage and alfalfa. Whatever is left over would be used to make animal bedding or transferred off site, according to the application.

A methane digester might also be considered to mitigate air pollution, te Velde said, though that's not in the immediate plans. He figures it will cost about \$4,000 per milking cow just to get the dairy up and running. The state CAFO permit does not require any air pollution measures.

Most of the environmental concerns raised by the public have already been addressed in the application, te Velde said.

"I don't think there are any new issues that came up," he said.

After some initial trepidation, the Morrow County Court has also come out in support of Lost Valley Ranch. Local officials had expressed concern about the development of a second large dairy within three critical groundwater areas, as well as impacts to nearby irrigation canals and concern for animal mistreatment.

In comments filed Aug. 24, the court said it trusts those issues will be addressed during the permit review process.

"The positive economic impacts that the proposed

dairy would have on our region, coupled with the review and oversight provided under the ODA permitting process, brings the county court to the conclusion that it is in the best interest of the Morrow County community to approve this application," they wrote.

## Environmental concerns

Other groups are pushing back against the proposal, urging the agencies to reject the Lost Valley permit over threats to the environment and public health.

Tarah Heinzen, staff attorney for Food & Water Watch based in Washington, D.C., was the lead author for 16 pages worth of comments filed on behalf of nine organizations, including Food & Water Watch, Columbia Riverkeeper, Friends of Family Farmers, the Northwest Environmental Defense Center, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Columbia Gorge, the U.S. Humane Society and the Center for Biological Diversity.

If approved, Lost Valley Ranch would generate waste on par with a mid-size city, Heinzen said. Meanwhile, the area is home to the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area, where the level of nitrates in the groundwater already exceeds the federal safe drinking water standard.

The potential for further water pollution is significant, Heinzen said, and Lost Valley's application too vague to assure the facility can handle such a large volume of waste.

"The size of this facility is just staggering," Heinzen said. "This is essentially going to be a sewer-less city."

According to their comments, the nine groups claim that CAFOs produce more than 300 million tons of waste across the country each year, which can include things like salmonella and E. coli making their way into nearby waterways. Yet the Oregon CAFO permit lacks surface water monitoring required under the federal Clean Water Act.

There are also no controls on regulating air emissions from the facility, said Lauren Goldberg, staff attorney for Columbia Riverkeeper.

"We were taken aback by the lack of critical public health, air and water pollution controls," Goldberg said.

In 2008, the Oregon Dairy Air Quality Task Force issued a final report to ODA and DEQ finding that dairies have the potential to emit several kinds of harmful pollutants, such as ammonia and methane. It issued a list of recommendations to create a dairy air quality program by 2015 — none of which have been implemented so far, Goldberg said.

# Grain commission ponders falling number problem

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

SPOKANE — Experts say no quick or easy answers exist for Pacific Northwest farmers taking a financial hit from low falling number in their wheat crop.

Some growers face severe discounts for their wheat as a result of the test.

Arron Carter, Washington State University winter wheat breeder, said it's difficult to pinpoint a cause for low falling number in a given field. The biggest need is to better understand the effects of the environment and the genetics, he said.

Falling number doesn't impact a field equally. There could be a pocket of low falling number wheat in one spot, or scattered throughout a shipment of wheat. One kernel of low falling number



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Washington State University winter wheat breeder Arron Carter talks with Washington Grain Commission board member Dana Herron Sept. 28 during the commission meeting in Spokane. Carter and the board discussed falling number discounts affecting farmers across the Pacific Northwest.

wheat could change a sample "dramatically," Washington Grain Commission industry representative Ty Jessup said. One sample could be 50 points different from another

several feet away.

Jessup said the lowest falling number he's seen is 61. The lowest possible falling number is 60.

Grain elevators use the

Hagberg-Perten falling number test to measure starch damage due to sprouting. A low falling number indicates a high level of alpha amylase, an enzyme that degrades starch and diminishes the quality of wheat. Grain with a falling number below 300 typically receives a discount in the Pacific Northwest. Rain and temperature fluctuations are the primary cause.

As farmers select varieties for fall planting, Carter recommends considering falling number in addition to disease resistance and yield potential. Falling number could be a problem again next year — or not at all, he said.

"If falling number's not their biggest concern, then look at the varieties that are addressing their biggest concern," he said. "If they've been burned for five years on falling number, they need to

consider that and think about their variety choices."

Some farmers say the current falling number test is unreliable and believe a more accurate solution is available.

The Rapid Visco Analyzer test, which examines flour samples like the falling number test and doesn't require a correction for altitude, but results can still vary by operator or laboratory, Carter said.

The equivalent technology of a whole-grain analyzer, used to measure protein in wheat, does not exist for falling number. The machine would need to be calibrated for falling number, Carter said.

The existing test "has its problems, but it's telling us which varieties have problems and which don't," he said. "I know it's not a perfect system, but for the most part it's doing what it was designed to do."

The commission and state Department of Agriculture are sending a letter to the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration and USDA Agricultural Research Service to highlight the challenges, said commission CEO Glen Squires.

They are requesting clarity on how falling number tests are run, including adjustments made for different altitudes.

For the future, the industry would like a whole-grain analyzer-type test that would be quicker and give farmers and elevator operators better information faster.

Currently, tests take about a week and a half, Squires said.

"The international grain trade — customers, exporters, everybody — uses this test," he said, referring to the falling number test.

# 'Geeks meet dirt' as company seeks farm solutions

By **SEAN ELLIS**  
Capital Press

CALDWELL, Idaho — A new Idaho company that matches the state's farm and hi-tech industries hopes to develop solutions that will save farmers money and boost productivity.

The company, Kairosys, matches the agricultural knowledge of vineyard owner and bee scientist Ron Bitner with the technological savvy of two former employees of Boise-based Micron Technology, a global leader in the semiconductor industry.

Tony Brower has 20 years of diverse experience in the semiconductor industry, including in business planning and data base access, and Jai Jaiprakash, an engineer, is an expert in the use of sensors and product development.

The company's motto is, "Geeks meet dirt," and Bitner believes it has the ability to solve many problems farmers face by making sense of the large amounts of information being collected on the farm and figuring out how it can be used to benefit farmers.

"People are collecting thousands of points of data but what does it mean?" he said. "That's what Jay's background is: taking all of that historical data (and) looking for trends."

The company's first project is developing an app that uses sensors placed in leafcutter bee incubators to predict when the bees will hatch for the alfalfa seed industry.

"That way, a farmer can predict pretty accurately when his bees are going to hatch and how long he can hold them if the weather's cold or if he has to spray," said Bitner, who has four decades of experience in the alfalfa seed industry.

During the spring, alfalfa seed growers have about \$100,000 worth



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Vineyard owner and bee scientist Ron Bitner stands in front of his Caldwell, Idaho, vineyard Aug. 19. Bitner has teamed up with two people from the semiconductor industry to try to create solutions for farmers.

of bees in incubators "and they just can't hardly sleep at night," Bitner said. "But if they have something tracking the bees for them, it's just insurance for them. We're trying to help them time the release of their bees and use fewer bees."

He expects to have the app developed by next spring.

"We have to work out the details (but) farmers are ready for it," he said. "We already have people asking for it."

The company is also studying

bloom times in alfalfa seed and how it ties in with the bees, as well as bug counts in seed fields to determine how chemicals affect them.

More projects will follow, Bitner said.

Kairosys is also partnering with USDA researchers to see how its technology can be used to help the nation's honeybee industry.

Matt Borud, chief business development officer for the Idaho Department of Commerce, said Kairosys is exactly what former IDC Direc-

tor Jeff Sayer had in mind when he kicked off an effort last year to bring the state's ag and tech sectors together to create jobs and solve problems for farmers.

"I think it's the poster child example," he said. "It's exactly the type of venture Jeff had in mind and we think there are still plenty more opportunities like this out there."

He said current IDC Director Megan Ronk shares Sayer's vision of turning Idaho into a Silicon Valley of agricultural technology.

# Official: Calif. water conservation slipping

By **SCOTT SMITH**  
Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. — Water conservation continues to slip in drought-stricken California after officials lifted mandatory cutbacks, officials said ahead of formally releasing the figures on Wednesday.

The State Water Resources Control Board in Sacramento is expected to reveal the amount of water Californians saved statewide in August.

"We're concerned that conservation levels are continuing to drop off as we enter a sixth year of exceptional drought," said Max Gomberg, a senior climate scientist for the water board.

Gomberg declined to release the exact figure ahead of the board's formal announcement.

Last winter, a near-average amount of rain and snow fell mostly in Northern California, prompting officials to relax conservation efforts by turning over control to local water districts.

Each district is responsible for telling its residents how much — or whether — they should cutback based on an analysis of their projected water supply and demanded for the next three years.

After calling for voluntary cutbacks, Gov. Jerry Brown at the height of drought last year, ordered residents to cutback by 25 percent.