Network will help Oregon growers, buyers connect

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Forty organizations, including Oregon State University and the Oregon Food Bank, have teamed up to strengthen local food systems and connect growers who struggle to find markets with buyers who struggle to obtain healthful food.

People involved with the new entity, which is called the Oregon Community Food Systems Network, or OCFSN, believe strong local and regional food systems can improve economic, social, health and environmental conditions throughout the state.

EO Media Group

The Astoria, Ore., Sunday Market is one of many farmers' markets in Oregon. A new network plans to boost the buying power of some shoppers to encourage them to buy more healthful food.

The network formed from the realization that many nonprofit organizations were working on aspects of food, farming, health, poverty and economic development issues, but were coming at it in a disconnected way. They would benefit by collaborating, said Lauren Gwin, associate director of OSU's Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems and a member of the new network's leadership team.

Jump-started with funding from the Meyer Memorial Trust, network members settled on four primary initiatives:

- Obtain money to match SNAP vouchers, formerly called food stamps, spent at farmers' markets and rural grocery stores. The move would double the purchasing power of SNAP recipients choosing to buy fresh and local food.
- Establish a "Veggie Rx" program, in which doctors could write a prescription for healthful food as they would for medicine. A program in Hood River, Ore., initiated by Gorge Grown, allows doctors to give patients $30 vouchers that can only be used to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. In the past year, the program helped 6,500 people buy food.
- Provide new and beginning farmers with access to farmland and capital by supporting various transition programs. With many farmers approaching retirement, analysts estimate two-thirds of Oregon farmland will change ownership in the coming years.
- Help producers scale-up and sell more to retail and institutional food buyers. One of the ideas is to establish food hubs that aggregate, process and store production from small farms to provide the large volume needed by big buyers.

The network's vision statement is ambitious: All Oregonians will have access to healthful, affordable food that is grown and processed regionally. This will happen in a food system that is environmentally and economically resilient and that "provides entrepreneurial opportunity and fulfilling livelihoods for employees throughout the supply chain."

Gwin, of OSU, said farmers should understand the group is not saying the existing food system is bad. It does keep people fed, she said, but serious health disparities exist.

The network also is "not just about small farms," she said, but about mid-size and large farms as well. The food they produce, the way it's produced and the impact on rural economic vitality are all part of the discussion, she said.

"Farmers need to know how to support that without losing their shirts," Gwin said. "It's important for ag to see themselves in this."

The network's website is at http://ocfsn.net

Analyst: Pivotal time for grain producers

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

A third straight year of low returns for many grain growers has set the stage for strained finances and analysts are cautioning farmers about the risks of using long-term assets to finance another year of production.

"The situation right now is we're coming off of three years where virtually every acre of production lost money," said Sterling Liddell, vice president and senior analyst for Rabo AgriFinance.

Capital Press File

Rabo AgriFinance says low returns for many grain growers has set the stage for strained finances and analysts are cautioning farmers about the risks of using long-term assets to finance another year of production.

"This sector has a lower probability of making returns enough to reinvest, and next year will be another year of loss," he said.

Many farmers have burned through a substantial amount of liquidity, leaving them to figure out what capital they can generate from the balance sheet to finance next year's crop. That means taking assets and turning them into cash flow through loans, he said.

In that situation, a farmer is using the long-term health of his farm, his equity, to finance farming — and he needs to be careful, he said.

Land is the primary asset of most farmers. But some are also considering other assets, such as retirement funds, investments outside the ag sector, homes and other properties, for generating cash flow, he said.

When a farmer loses the money he's borrowed against an asset, primarily land, the long-term health of the business is eroding. He needs to protect the long-term assets he's built up, he said.

That starts with being able to manage assets, but also being able to manage production, he said.

If he's farming some acres that aren't making money, either his own land or leased land, does it make sense to use borrowed money to farm them or walk away from those acres? he asked.

Wet October pushes Yakima reservoirs refill

Five mountain lakes above average levels

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Five mountain reservoirs serving the Yakima Basin have a lot more water than a year ago and, at this point, they appear headed for a good winter refill, preventing water shortages next summer.

The five — Keechelus, Kachess, Cle Elum, Bumping and Rimrock — total 1,065,400 acre-feet of water when full. They were at 354,000 by the end of October, well ahead of the October-end average of 282,000 acre-feet, said Chris Lynch, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation hydrologist for the Yakima Basin Project.

"We've started from a much better position than last year. That's really good," he said.

The project manages water storage and flow through reservoirs, streams and rivers to provide irrigation water to 464,000 acres of mostly farmland along 175 miles of the 214-mile-long Yakima River in the Kittitas and Yakima valleys.

Irrigators depend on the reservoirs and need 700,000 more acre-feet of snowmelt out of 2.3 million acre-feet normally stored in mountain snowpack.

The reservoirs reached a low of 244,500 acre-feet of water Oct. 12, three days ahead of normal, and significantly above the low mark a year ago of 107,323 acre-feet following the 2015 drought.

However, this year's low was below the 30-year average of 261,000 acre-feet, Lynch said. The good news, he said, was the rain turned that around by month's end.

October was wetter than normal with record rainfalls recorded in Seattle, Spokane, Yakima, Pullman and Colville, said Nic Loyd, meteorologist at Washington State University's AgWeatherNet, a network of 177 weather stations.

Nearly 2.5 inches of rain fell in Yakima in October, breaking a record of 2.22 inches in 1950, he said.

Lynch said rainfall at all five reservoirs normally adds up to 17.5 inches for October but topped 45.2 inches this October. That's not total rainfall but a compilation of the rainfall at all five sites.

"It recharges our groundwater after a pretty dry spring and summer and that makes a difference, before our snowfall, for next year's water supply," he said.

And the outlook is good.

The Climate Prediction Center of the National Weather Service is forecasting equal chances of below and above normal temperatures for Washington state in November but increased chances of above normal precipitation. The same is true for December through February.

That bodes well for Yakima Basin irrigators but forecasts "are not anchored in concrete and can switch around," Lynch said.

Ferry County sheriff says he's frustrated with Washington wolfpack

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

AIRWAY HEIGHTS, Wash. — A tracker will monitor parts of Ferry County, Wash., where wolves and people could interact, including school bus routes, the local sheriff says.

County Sheriff Ray Maycumber said he's concerned about a scenario in which wolves are chasing prey and come across a child waiting for the morning school bus.

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Ferry County Sheriff Ray Maycumber speaks about his experience with the Profanity Peak wolfpack Oct. 29 during the Cattle Producers of Washington annual meeting in Airway Heights, Wash.

Maycumber said state wildlife managers haven't satisfied him that the possibility doesn't exist.

He spoke during the annual Cattle Producers of Washington meeting on Oct. 29.

"Not a one of them, even their most diehard advocates, have been able to look me in the eye and tell me (the wolf) wouldn't take that kid," Maycumber said. He said he told state wildlife officials, "Knowing everything we know about the situation, should the unlikely scenario occur ... all the knowledge we have will be used to bury us."

Statistics don't support a wolf attacking people, "but a hungry animal will do things that are non-typical," Maycumber said. "When there's nothing to eat up there, I tend not to put a lot of faith in the words of the department, who says, 'They'll just live on grouse,'" he told the ranchers.

Maycumber deals with the Profanity Peak wolfpack, which has at least 10 confirmed kills and five probable kills of cattle.

The state killed six adult wolves and one pup in the pack. A second pup may have died of natural causes. One adult female and two to three pups remain.

State experts told Maycumber the remaining wolves are not likely to attack cattle. But with the pack's social structure "shattered," their behavior is difficult to predict, he said.

Maycumber said he is "becoming quite an irritation" to the Department of Fish and Wildlife and outlined several of his frustrations:

- On delisting the wolves in the eastern one-third of the state: "My opinion is we'd be much better off if they never would have delisted them, because Wildlife Services has a lot more streamlined process and are a lot more aggressive when they remove problem wolves."
- On the state wolf plan: "I've looked over their plan and I don't know what the purpose was unless it was just to cause chaos, because that's where we're at."
- On the wolf-cattle interface: "In some cases they say wolves can peacefully exist with cows. Well, only until they get hungry."
- "I shouldn't have to be at odds with the Department of Fish and Wildlife," he said. "I've tried not to be at odds, I'm just trying to get them to do their jobs in an effective, consistent manner."