

Oregon

SAGE Center tells Eastern Oregon agriculture's story

Entering its fourth year, ag museum eyes long-term messaging

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
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BOARDMAN, Ore. — The story of agriculture and energy production in Eastern Oregon is an increasingly high-tech narrative, replete with GPS-driven tractors, wind and solar power and irrigation pivots controlled by the touch of a smartphone.

So when the Port of Morrow set out to highlight these industries, it devised a modern museum with interactive features to show visitors where their food and electricity comes from.

Three years later, the Sustainable Agriculture and Energy — or SAGE — Center continues to find its footing as a tourist destination along Interstate 84, advertising as far as Portland and the Tri-Cities while also hosting local job fairs and community events.

Kalie Davis, SAGE Center manager, said they are seeing signs of progress: last year's Morrow County Harvest Festival drew more than 1,000 people in a single day, and new television commercials boosted general admission by about 14 visitors per day during the month of June.

Annual visitation, however, has been mostly flat, averaging 19,507 people with no year-to-year increase. By comparison, the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center in The Dalles had 27,795 visitors (not including tour groups from Columbia River cruise lines), and the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center in Baker City had 41,221 visitors.

Looking ahead, Davis said the SAGE Center will continue marketing to the Portland metro area and Tri-Cities, with another round of ads to begin in March. Davis also plans to attend this year's Oregon Ag Fest at the State Fairgrounds in April.

It is important, Davis said, for people to understand how their food is made, processed and shipped. That's what the SAGE Center offers, through exhibits such as a video tractor game, mock french fry processing line and video board that displays where products are exported around the world.

"People who come in are typically very confused about what they're going to see," Davis said. "As they go through, they're just wowed by all these industries located in such a small region."

Visitors normally would not be able to tour these facilities, Davis said, due to food safety and security regulations. The SAGE Center is a way for them to better understand how farm and energy technology works.

"I think it's fascinating for people to learn how far things have come over the last hundred years," Davis said.

The SAGE Center operates with the backing and support of the Port of Morrow, Oregon's second-largest port, with approximately 50 businesses generating more than \$100 million in tax revenue for the state.

Gary Neal, general manager at the port, initially wanted to create a museum in 2001 after Tillamook Cheese opened a new cheese-making plant in Boardman but did not include a visitor center like the one it has in Tillamook.

Instead, Neal thought the port could shine a spotlight on all the natural resource-based industries it serves, from making cheese and potato chips to electricity and ethanol.

"These are some of the most sophisticated operations in the world here," Neal said. "We need to tell that story."

Early designs for the SAGE Center called for a 10,000-square-foot box-shaped building, though the final building would be three times as large with a silo-themed exterior, movie



A group of women from the Oregon and Washington potato commissions tours the SAGE Center on Jan. 25 in Boardman, Ore.

E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

theater and additional conference space.

The SAGE Center opened June 1, 2013, and cost \$8.2 million to build. Roughly \$3.7 million came from the state and \$4.5 million came from the port.

"We think it's a first-class facility," Neal said. "We're pretty proud of it."

Over the last three fiscal years, Neal said the port has continued to cover between \$400,000 and \$600,000 per year in operating costs at the center. However, with a \$40 million capital budget, he said the port is happy to continue supporting the center.

"We didn't get into this lightly," Neal said. "It's not a

routine thing that we do, but it's something important that we felt we needed to do."

Neal said the SAGE Center was never intended to be self-supporting. Education, not money, is the goal, and he believes they are doing a good job at the center.

Others at the port and around the region agree.



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

The SAGE Center opened its doors on June 1, 2013, and averages 19,507 visitors a year.

Debbie Radie, vice president of operations for Boardman Foods — an onion processor that employs 175 people — said many of their customers have a specific interest in sustainable farming and energy efficiency.

The SAGE Center is a place where Radie said she can bring customers to learn about how those farming practices work.

"Sometimes people are misinformed and not understanding how sustainable the water use is here," Radie said. "I think the SAGE Center showcases that well."

Radie said employees at Boardman Foods also appreciate being able to bring their kids and families to the SAGE Center for movie nights or activities.

"That just helps support a way of life that people enjoy," she said.

James Bradshaw, director of the energy systems technology program at Walla Walla Community College, said he brings 30 to 40 students every year to the Agriculture and Energy Job Fair, where they can network with about 30 different potential employers.

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