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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

It's all about the niche

Ten years ago, the word “niche” occasionally came up in conversations — usually those about foreign words no one could define.

Today, niche is a common term. It describes how businesses carve out a small portion of a market as a specialty. Especially in agriculture, farmers, ranchers, processors and retailers all seem to be looking for just the right niche. Especially for small-scale operations, a niche is an important part of any business plan. No small farm or processor could ever produce the same crop or product as a large one and hope to compete. The economies of scale are always on the side of the big guys.

But if the right niche can be carved out, size doesn't matter. In fact, in the case of many niches, small is better.

Micro-breweries are a perfect example of how niches work. Every consumer knows the large



EO Media Group File

When it comes to micro-breweries, the more choices, the better. The proliferation of niches allows small and large farmers, ranchers and processors to flourish.

players among breweries. They produce such international brands as Budweiser, Miller and Coors, which they sell by the truckload.

A micro-brewery, however,

is selling more than good beer in large quantities. It's selling a much smaller amount of many unique beers. Beers can have unusual flavors such as berries,

honey, chocolate and vanilla. These and others are added to styles such as pale ales, pilsners, porters, stouts, lagers and hefeweizens.

A recent stroll through a neighborhood supermarket found 142 distinct types and styles of micro-brews for sale in addition to the mainstream brands.

This creates the triple benefits of allowing small breweries to survive — and even thrive — in a world of brewing goliaths. At the same time, the added niches generate demand for different types of ingredients such as hops and barley, benefiting farmers. And finally, the proliferation of micro-breweries benefits large brewers, too, as consumers will also try their many types of beers.

That same principle is being applied to nearly every sector of agriculture. Whether it's meats, vegetables, nursery stock or even Christmas trees, growers, marketers and retailers are

carving out niches for their crops.

One type of niche is certifications such as organic, biodynamic and salmon safe. Other niches are kosher, halal, local, artisan and hand-made. Others are gluten-free, vegan, GMO-free, grass-fed and everyone's favorite, sustainable. How crops are sold is also a niche. CSAs, U-pick, roadside stands, niche grocery stores and even meals-in-a-box are all gaining popularity.

All of which is good, and provides consumers with many choices, depending on their preferences and how much they can afford to spend.

Which brings us to another niche, the largest of all. It's the niche filled by the vast majority of farmers and ranchers, who provide Americans — and much of the world — with healthful, plentiful and affordable food.

It is a niche that none of us could do without.

OUR VIEW



Crop signs help bridge urban-rural divide

The farm community talks a lot about the urban-rural divide, that sense that people in the cities don't understand, and perhaps don't care, about what's happening in small towns and farm country.

It's particularly true about most issues concerning agriculture. Part of the problem is that most Americans, even those living outside of big cities, are three or more generations removed from the farm.

So, as people drive down the highway past the region's most productive farmland — as close as many get to a farm — they are often unsure that they're looking at.

For 30 years there has been a program in Oregon to put up crop and breed identification signs along the highway to help educate passing motorists about what's growing in the fields. The Oregon Women for Agriculture and Oregon Aglink have partnered to raise more than 200 crop identification signs across the state.

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It's a great tool to quickly educate the public about the diversity of Oregon agriculture.

“We're about education, and people didn't really understand what they were driving past, and it's important to us for them to know what it was,” said Dona Coon, former OWA president and daughter-in-law of Pat Roberts, who initially created the concept of the signs.

It has been a great statewide effort. There have been similar efforts in Washington and Idaho. The Nampa-Caldwell Agribusiness Committee of the chamber of commerce, for example, places about 150 signs identifying 30 different crops around Canyon County, Idaho.

We encourage farmers to participate in the program where available, and agribusinesses to support them financially.

The signs are a great way to create a connection between consumers and the food grown in the Pacific Northwest.

Readers' views

The problem with biosolids

The “no threat from biosolids” from the Environmental Protection Agency was developed from limited research done in the 1970s and 1980s. It is 2017. When you look at the chemicals, 80,000 and growing, now flushed down the sewer you just have to wonder why anyone would take the side of this ill-conceived process (CFR40-503).

Further, if you actually read the EPA risk assessment from the 1980s on the land application of industrial, medical, storm and household sewage sludge (biosolids) you will have more red flags pop up than you have toes and fingers. Google “biosolid risk assessment.”

Further, when you factor in the municipalities on the East Coast having their right to dump in the ocean with the 1972 Clean Water Act and the fact that sewage has always been driven by organized crime, do you get a sort of conspiracy feeling?

U.S. EPA's 40 CFR 261.30(d) and 261.33 (4), every U.S. industry connected to a sewer can discharge any amount of hazardous and acute hazardous waste into sewage treatment plants. There are over 80,000 chemicals in commerce and growing even today.

When the EPA and the sewage industry tells you industrial pretreatment takes care of that read: EPA's OIG's Report 14-P-0363. Just Google the number to see that industrial pre-treatment has not worked and is not working.

Anaerobic digestion will not degrade a large percentage of these chemicals.

Chemicals that are persistent in the environment, bio-accumulate in people and/or wildlife, and are toxic are called PBTs and neurotoxins such as microcystin (a hemotoxin), phycotoxins, domoic acid, brevetoxin. Because of these features, as long as they remain in commerce and may therefore be released into the environment, will threaten the health of humans, wildlife, including aquatic life.

“Biosolids” are over burdened with phosphates. Phosphates cause algae blooms.

Chemicals cause cancer.

Craig Monk
Waxahachie, Texas

Renewable Fuel Standard should be protected

Oregon is home to vast renewable resources, providing new and exciting opportunities to lead the way in the fight against climate change. We produce 13 percent of the nation's hydroelectric power and our geothermal potential is rivaled only by Nevada and California. We are also home to some of the West Coast's premier biofuel facilities, producing cleaner liquid fuels from agricultural feedstocks, supporting nearly 16,000 Oregon jobs.

A lot of this progress has been driven by state and local efforts. But federal policies play an important role. That's why we need our lawmakers in Congress to stand up for the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS), which ensures that renewable fuel can compete at the gas pump. Oil companies are looking for any opportunity to hold back competition, and biofuels are a top target. They displaced 500 million barrels of oil in 2016, cutting emissions and protecting consumers from price manipulation. More importantly, thanks to the increasingly sustainable agricultural practices, those biofuels cut emissions by an average of 43 percent, according to federal reports. Conventional ethanol production also leaves behind processed grain that is re-purposed as low-cost animal feed. The next generation of ethanol, produced from material like wood waste and corn cobs is even more promising, with some varieties reducing the total carbon in the atmosphere over their full lifecycle.

Thanks to smart policies like the RFS, the future is bright for Oregon. Lawmakers like Congressman Greg Walden, who chairs the energy committee, should take note, and protect that progress.

Bobby Levy
Echo, Ore.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.

PHOTO: Signs like this one help bridge the urban-rural divide by letting drivers know which crops are grown on farms.

Aliya Hall/Capital Press