

Oregon

Co-op lists farm bill priorities

By ALIYA HALL
Capital Press

McMINNVILLE, Ore. — An Oregon member of Congress heard from organic dairy cooperative members last week about what they want from the next farm bill.

Rep. Suzanne Bonamici, D-Ore., toured the newly refurbished Organic Valley Creamery and Forest Glen Jerseys dairy farm on Aug. 25 and was briefed on the co-op's priorities as Congress works on a new farm bill.

Jake Schmitz, the co-op's regional pool manager, and Scott Fields, the McMinnville plant manager, told her Organic Valley's priorities include modernizing organic trade oversight by increasing funding of the National Organic Program to identify and shut down suspected international fraud and supporting a technology upgrade to better track international organic trade.

Schmitz, who used to work as an organic certifier, said that while there are many organic businesses with integrity, there needs to



At Dan Bansen's Forest Glen Jerseys farm, Rep. Suzanne Bonamici, D-Ore., pets one of the newborn calves.

be more enforcement against those that cheat the system.

"We need a budget increase to employ more certifiers to get work done and monitor it all," he said.

Also on the list is funding more organic research and maintaining conservation investments by renewing and maintaining the working

lands conservation programs.

An investment of \$16.5 million is needed each year to keep in line with growth of organic agriculture, according to Organic Valley. In 2016, U.S. organic sales were \$47 billion and there were 24,650 organic certificate holders.

Schmitz and Melissa Coll-

man, an Organic Valley cooperative member from Cloud Cap Dairy in Boring, Ore., also said the NOP needs to modernize its technology.

"There's no way to upload information," Collman said. "You have to keep track by hand. There is no modernization, and technology would make (the process) better."

Bonamici expressed concerns she heard about whether younger generations will be taking over the farming business.

However, Schmitz told her that with the profitability of organic dairy farms, it has become a viable option to own a farm — last month he signed up two sons taking over the family farm.

Schmitz said because the younger generations are enthused about organic farming it's important to continue research in the field.

Fields walked Bonamici through the butter plant, showing her the process of separating the cream and the milk, which was pasteurized, dried and bagged as powder.

Fields said much of the cost of refurbishing the creamery was spent in the pasteurization room, and estimated with Schmitz that refurbishing the plant cost about \$1 million, including a state grant of \$350,000.

Bonamici later met with Dan Bansen at Forest Glen Jerseys in Dayton — her first visit to an organic dairy farm.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press File

Oregon State University researcher Joel Felix has shown that sweet potatoes grow well in the Treasure Valley of Oregon and Idaho, but farmers have been hesitant to grow them.

Researcher not giving up on sweet potatoes

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Sweet potatoes grow well in the desert climate of the Treasure Valley region of Idaho and Oregon. Six years of field trials by an Oregon State University researcher have shown that.

But so far, growers have struggled to find a steady market in the Treasure Valley.

OSU weed scientist Joel Felix has grown sweet potatoes at the university's agricultural experiment station near Ontario since 2011 and the results have been good, with yields comparable to what sweet potato growers in California achieve, he said.

But few farmers in this region have opted to grow them for long. As far as Felix knows, only one farmer currently grows them, on about 40 acres. That farmer didn't respond to requests to be interviewed for this article.

Felix believes there is a market for the crop in the region, between the grocery stores that sell them fresh and processors in the area that turn them into sweet potato fries. They are shipped here for processing from as far away as Florida.

He said sweet potatoes will never replace the major crops grown in this region such as onions, potatoes, sugar beets and corn. But they could be a nice niche market for some farmers, he added.

It's just a matter of figuring out the right market opportunity.

"I think there is room for sweet potatoes in the valley," Felix said. "I'm not losing hope."

Bill Johnson grew sweet potatoes on his farm in 2011 under contract with a local processor. However, the processor chose not to renew the contract the next year for whatever reason, he said.

He confirmed that the crop grows well here and said it could work for someone with a fresh packing facility, which Johnson didn't have.

"I'm convinced you can successfully grow them in the Treasure Valley," he said. "I think there is a legitimate opportunity here. But you have to figure out how to sell them. You have to complete the business."

The hot summers the area typically experiences — high temperatures often exceed 100 degrees — are not a problem for the crop, Felix said.

"That is like heaven for sweet potatoes," he said. "It's a plant that enjoys the heat."

Felix will continue his trials, with an emphasis on finding varieties that can be planted earlier in the area so the roots have more time to size.

Growers in the area would have to be careful not to plant them too early or harvest them too late in the season to avoid the potential of a killing frost on either end.

"The timing of planting is really critical," he said.

Felix said the trials have proven sweet potatoes can be grown here and he will continue fine-tuning them to find the right varieties that could fill the niche market in the area for the fresh market.

Ruling expands farmer cellphone use while driving

Oregon farmers will soon lose exemption to law

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

An Oregon Appeals Court ruling broadly allows farmers to use cellphones for agricultural operations while driving, but a new law will soon nullify the decision.

An \$80 traffic ticket issued to hog farmer Michelle Renee Bennett was overturned

by the appellate court, which held that she was allowed to coordinate pork deliveries on her cellphone while driving.

Mobile devices generally can't be used in Oregon while operating vehicles, but the prohibition currently has an exemption "for the purpose of farming or agricultural operations."

Contrary to the State of Oregon's interpretation of the law, farmers can use cellphones for delivering goods or other agricultural operations while driving and aren't strictly limited to the "agri-

cultural production phase," the ruling said.

Agricultural operations don't necessarily occur on farmland, as they include the "whole process" or "business activity," such as marketing crops and livestock, according to the appellate court.

This characterization of the law is backed up by legislative history, since lawmakers realized the language could be interpreted broadly but chose not to narrow the exemption, the ruling said.

The Oregon Department of Justice said it's reviewing

the decision.

However, growers will only have roughly a month to take advantage of the ruling, since a law passed this year eliminates the agricultural exemption on Oct. 1.

Due to concerns about increased traffic fatalities, lawmakers approved House Bill 2597, which created harsher penalties for using mobile devices while driving and eliminated exemptions to the statute.

The Oregon Farm Bureau plans to discuss the issue with its members to see

how they're affected by the changed law and then potentially suggest revisions to lawmakers, said Jenny Dresler, state public policy director for the group.

Bennett, of Sweet Briar Farms in Eugene, Ore., said she's a law-abiding citizen and will abide by the stricter prohibition.

Bennett said she believes distracted driving is a problem, but felt comfortable using her cellphone that day in May 2014 because she was traveling slower than 10 mph in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

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