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Extension agent preaches goals, vision to beginning farmers

Beginners must assess skills, then find market

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

INSIDE: Apprenticeships can put new farmers on right track

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CORVALLIS, Ore. — It often begins with a few acres and a dream of living the good life, tied to the earth and in harmony with nature.

But, as Rachel Suits told a room of would-be farmers Feb. 24, starting a small farm is not easy. The hours are long, the labor strenuous, and it could take years before they see any return on investment.

Suits, who works for Oregon State University Extension Service in the Columbia River Gorge, led a presentation titled "Exploring the Small Farm Dream" as part of the 2018 Oregon Small Farms Conference at the OSU campus in Corvallis.

Roughly 1,000 people maxed out attendance at the daylong conference, with seminars held at the LaSells Stewart Center and CH2M Alumni Center. Suits' talk was tailored specifically to new or beginning farmers, offering tips and resources on how to get started.

Running a successful farm boils down to three questions, Suits said — What do you want to do? What can you do? and What can you sell?

"That sweet spot is right in the middle," she said.

First, Suits recommended making a detailed map of the property showing where fields, buildings, fences, roads and water sources are. That, she said, will help determine what is logistically possible on the new farm or ranch.

Water is especially important, since access to irrigation dramatically increases the number of options available to farmers.

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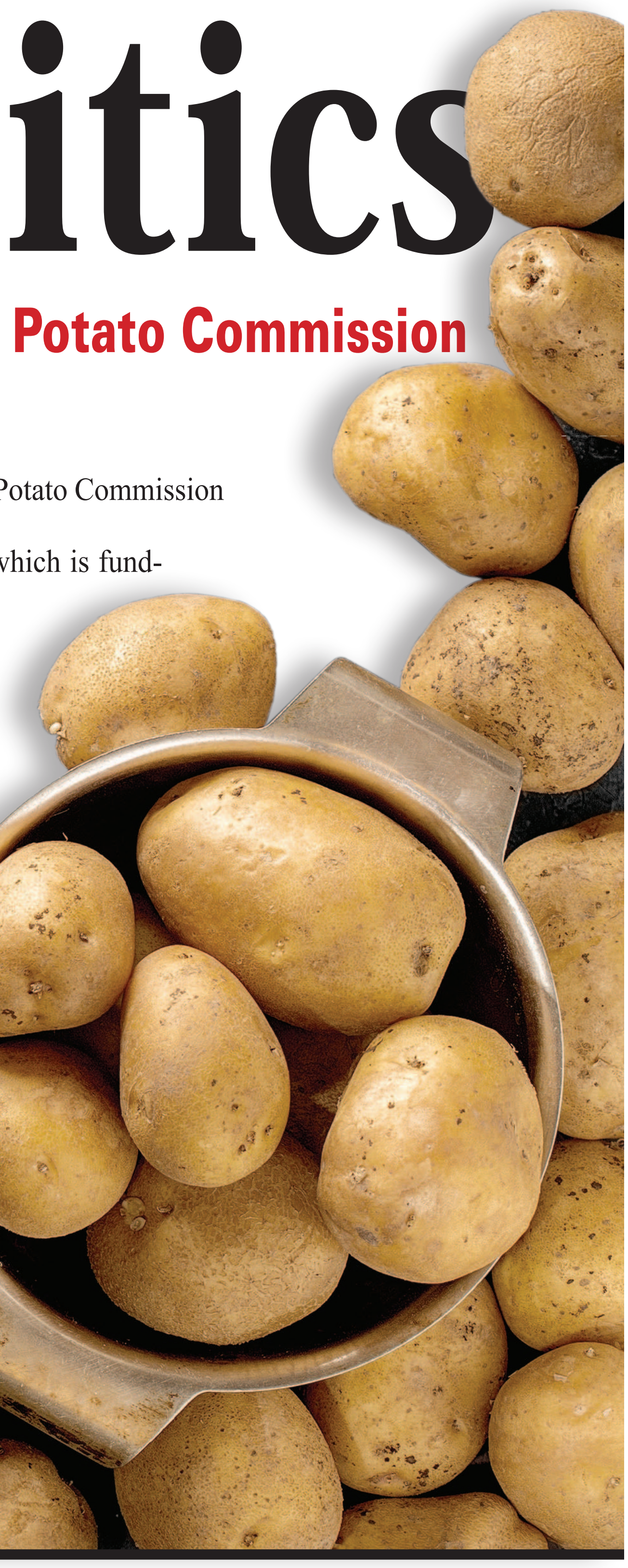
George Plaven/Capital Press

Rachel Suits, with the Oregon State University Extension Service, leads a seminar called "Exploring the Small Farm Dream" at the annual Oregon Small Farms Conference on Feb. 24 in Corvallis. As a first step, she recommended aspiring farmers make a detailed map of their property showing the locations of the fields, buildings, fences, roads and water sources.

Potato Politics

E. Idaho grower petition seeks bigger voice on Idaho Potato Commission

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press



BOISE — Some Eastern Idaho potato growers are petitioning for a bigger voice in the Idaho Potato Commission and how its nine members are chosen.

The commissioners are responsible for overseeing the IPC and its $15 million budget, which is funded through a grower assessment of 12.5 cents per every 100 pounds of potatoes Idaho farmers grow.

Supporters of the proposal to alter the commission believe that since the governor has the final say on who serves on it, the IPC doesn't necessarily always represent how the state's potato growers feel on certain issues.

They also question whether potato farmers are getting the most bang for their buck from the potato assessment.

"We want to connect the commission back to the growers who are paying the tax," said Stephanie Mickelsen, a potato grower near Idaho Falls. "If you ask potato farmers who their commissioners are, most of them can't tell you."

Stephanie Mickelsen

The Mickelsen family farm crafted the proposal. They presented its highlights to members of the House Agricultural Affairs Committee Feb. 12. They said the petition is supported by 25 farmers who represent about 100,000 of the roughly 320,000 acres of potatoes grown each year in Idaho, which is the national leader in spud production.

Marketing success

Immediately before that presentation, IPC President and CEO Frank Muir presented the committee with highlights showing how the commission has benefited the Idaho potato industry since he was hired in July 2003.

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Dairy producers advised to prepare for turbulence

Experts advise different responses to financial pressures

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — With milk prices falling below the cost of production, dairymen need to brace themselves to withstand financial turbulence, experts say.

Losses could extend into next year, so farmers must plan for survival until consumption unexpectedly rises or — as is more likely — production is forced to decline, said Gary Sipiorski, an economist and former banker who spoke Feb. 26 at the Oregon Dairy Farmers Association's convention in Salem, Ore.

"Something's got to give," he said.

Dairy producers should "stress test" their operations to find ways of controlling production costs while planning with lenders now for potential cash flow shortages, Sipiorski said.

There are dairymen who can "crank out" milk at a lower cost, he said. For example, reducing crowding can cut down on costly metabolic problems, though producers don't want to significantly dent their production.

LinkedIn

Gary Sipiorski

"There's a fine balance there," Sipiorski said.

Gary Genske, a dairy farmer and certified public accountant, took a tack other than focusing on expenses.

"I'm not going to tell you how to feed your cows better, I'm not going to tell you how to breed your cows better," he said Feb. 27 at the convention.

Dairy producers who've managed to stay in the business must know what they're doing, even as financial downturns have "eaten through a lot of equity over the years," he said.

"There are a lot of people feeling they can be the last man standing," Genske said. "Everybody feels that way."

While dairymen have focused on becoming more efficient, they haven't spent enough time trying to increase the price they're paid for milk, he said.

"That's our fault. That's on us," Genske said. "It comes down to us not managing our co-ops."

Cooperatives have "dropped the ball" in terms of making profits for their farmer members, even though that's the theoretical purpose of such organizations, he said.

Board members who approve cooperative decisions are often too passive, allowing corporate executives to "hide behind" them, Genske said.

Genske advised against allowing cooperatives to accept more milk or make capital improvements unless the actions are shown to improve milk prices for members.

Everything on the agenda at a cooperative's board meeting should be explained in terms of milk price impacts, he said.

"We've got to change the way our co-ops do business," Genske said.

Cooperatives are often geared toward earning profits that result in executive bonuses but do little to help dairy producers, he said. "That profit does not make up for the milk price."