Apprenticeships can put new farmers on right track

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

Photos by George Plaven/Capital Press
Justin Moran, who manages Leaping Lamb Farm near Alsea, Ore., with his wife, Teagan, talks about their experiences with farm internship and apprenticeship programs at Saturday's Oregon Small Farms Conference.

Roughly 1,000 people attended the 2018 Oregon Small Farms Conference at Oregon State University in Corvallis. See related story on Page 1.

CORVALLIS, Ore. — Justin Moran had his heart set on farming from the moment he arrived in the United States.

"I wanted to be an active participant in society. I wanted to do good in the world," Moran said at the 2018 Oregon Small Farms Conference at Oregon State University. "Farming seemed to be the best fit for all those interests I had."

Moran, 35, met his wife, Teagan, at a farm in his native England before they decided to move back together to her home in Portland in 2013. The couple now manages Leaping Lamb Farm in Alsea, Ore., a small community in the Willamette Valley.

For several years in between, Moran honed his skills through hands-on fieldwork and apprenticeships at local farms, experiencing everything from 55-hour harvest weeks in the hot summer sun to artificially inseminating pigs during just his second day on the job.

Without that immersion, Moran said he would not have the confidence to manage an entire farm operation so early in his career.

"I literally got thrown in at the deep end," he said. "We got to develop a whole bunch of practical, hands-on skills on the farm."

Moran spoke Saturday at the conference as part of a seminar on agricultural internships and apprenticeships.

Meghan Fehrman, education program director for Rogue Farm Corps based in Ashland, Ore., said on-farm programs provide valuable training for the next generation of farmers.

The average age of Oregon farmers is approaching 60, Fehrman said, and as those older farmers begin to retire, more than 10 million acres — or 64 percent — or Oregon's agricultural lands are set to change ownership over the next two decades.

Rogue Farm Corps works with host farms in the Portland metro area, central Oregon, the south Willamette Valley and Rogue Valley to ensure young farmers are ready to take over those operations and keep them in production.

"The aging farmer population is a huge concern across the nation," Fehrman said. "We're really in a situation where we've got to figure this out."

As a core member of the National Ag Apprenticeship Learning Network, Fehrman said Rogue Farm Corps has spent the last year and a half sorting out legal and program requirements for farms to host interns and apprentices. The so-called Ag Apprenticeship Tool Kit should be released within the next week, she said.

"There's a lot to consider for these programs," Fehrman said. "We really want to make sure apprenticeships are upholding that environmental justice part of our work."

Internships through Rogue Farm Corps run for one season, from April through November, and include between 1,200 and 1,500 hours in the field with a mentor. Apprenticeships are more intensive, lasting two seasons and incorporating more managerial experience and business training.

Moran said he believes the structured framework of an apprenticeship provides a rich experience for both the mentor and the student. But he said it is not for every farm.

"For people considering hosting interns, if you just need labor, it's not the right idea," Moran said. "Be prepared to equip yourself with those skills to offer a rich experience."

Carbon tax calls for refashioning rural Washington

Senate budget panel advances bill

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A carbon tax bill in the Washington Senate seeks to shelter farmers from higher fuel costs and calls for investing in rural economies with electric vehicles, public transit and a faster internet to encourage telecommuting.

Farm groups and rural Republican legislators, however, have not warmed to the bill.

Sen. Reuven Carlyle

Farm groups say they're worried about increasing off-farm transportation costs, while rural lawmakers say the tax will penalize their constituents who drive long distances to work.

"We might as well go back to the horse and buggy because that's what they're going to be able to afford," said Republican Sen. Randi Becker, who represents rural parts of Thurston and Pierce counties in Western Washington.

A carbon tax has never before progressed as far in the Legislature, but it has this session. The Democratic-controlled Senate Ways and Means Committee passed Senate Bill 6203 along party-lines Thursday.

The carbon tax may advance no farther. Two Democrats voted "yes" to keep the bill alive, but warned they wanted it amended to reduce the measure's reliance on higher consumer energy costs to steer the economy from fossil fuels.

Sen. Bob Hasegawa, D-Seattle, said the Legislature should take on reducing greenhouse gases, but added, "I am really concerned about the strategy that's being used through a regressive tax such as this, where those who can least afford it will be bearing the biggest burden."

The Washington Farm Bureau counts producers among those least able to afford the tax. The carbon tax wouldn't apply to diesel, biodiesel and aviation fuel used in food production, but it would increase other production costs, Farm Bureau associate director of government relations Evan Sheffels said.

"We just can't absorb those costs," he said. "We're looking for something that would be farm-budget neutral, and we don't see it."

At a hearing this month, Northwest Agricultural Cooperative Council lobbyist Ben Buchholz said the tax would raise the cost of moving goods "from the farm supply store to the farm and from the farm to the farmers' market or the packing house or to the port. That's our biggest concern."

The bill's prime sponsor, Seattle Democrat Reuven Carlyle, said carbon-reduction projects in rural areas make more sense than ratcheting up spending on the effects of climate change such as wildfires.

"It really has the practical effect of being a capital budget for our rural areas, for our water systems, for our forests and for our public infrastructure," he said.

The committee set the tax rate at $12 per ton of carbon dioxide. It will increase energy costs, including gasoline by more than 10 cents a gallon, according to state estimates. The tax would increase by $1 annually until reaching $30 per ton of carbon dioxide.

According to a report by the governor's budget office, a slightly lower tax rate would raise more than $400 million a year. State agencies would add 87.5 employees to collect the tax and oversee its allocation.

Processing projects will help lessen milk oversupply

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press
Cows feed at this dairy near Hansen, Idaho. The Idaho Dairymen's Association welcomes two expansion projects that will increase dairy processing capacity in the state but says even more capacity is needed to handle all the milk being produced.

Two expansions in dairy processing in south-central Idaho are welcome news to dairymen, who are experiencing negative margins due to the state's oversupply of milk.

Magic Valley Quality Milk Producers, a milk marketing cooperative owned by dairy farmers with a facility in Jerome, has broken ground on a $20 million project.

A mile and a half away, Commercial Creamery, a fourth-generation family-owned business that produces cheese powders and snack seasonings, will break ground this spring on a $7 million project.

The projects are absolutely good news, said Rick Naerebout, CEO of Idaho Dairymen's Association.

"Any expansion in processing capacity that increases the infrastructure supplied by dairy producers is a positive thing," he said.

Magic Valley Quality Milk supplies about 3 million pounds of raw milk a day to Idaho processing companies that manufacture such finished products as cheese and butter, said Alan Stutzman, the co-op's general manager.

The processing component will allow the co-op to separate milk into cream for resale and process the remaining skim milk into either ultra-filtered skim milk or condensed milk, depending on the market, he said.

Additional capacity is expected to be up to 1 million pounds of milk a day and gives the co-op the ability to expand its market geographically, probably all over the U.S., he said.

"It's another avenue for some of our milk," he said.

Adding a processing component has been in the planning stages since about 2005. It's the first phase in the co-op's long-term plan for further processing milk into finished product, he said.

"It's a long-term investment that will do what we needed to do," he said.

The project is expected to be completed in about a year, he said.

With dairymen facing negative margins for the next six to 12 months, the investment by the co-op members is impressive, courageous and extremely positive, Naerebout said.

It's certainly a help to the oversupply situation. But realistically, Idaho's market is oversupplied by 1.5 million to 2 million pounds of milk per day. The expansion is significant but won't completely solve the problem, he said.

"We still have more milk than the market can handle," he said.

At Commercial Creamery, the company doesn't use milk.

But it purchases 40-pound blocks of cheese, millions of pounds annually, said Will Gilmartin, the company's operations manager.

The expansion will potentially grow production of its dry cheese and seasoning spray powders by 20 to 30 percent, he said.

"It will enable us to continue growing at the rate we want … and upgrade the facility and phase out old equipment at the same time," he said.

The company sells its dry product in bulk to food manufacturers, such as tortilla and potato chip companies.

But its products are also used in other products, such as rice and pasta dishes, frozen vegetables, entrees and dressings, he said.

The project is expected to be completed by the end of the year, he said.

Eastern Oregon co-op to expand Columbia River grain terminal

Project aided by $2.5 million ConnectOregon grant

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

Morrow County Grain Growers, a farm supply and marketing cooperative based in northeast Oregon, broke ground Wednesday morning on a major expansion of its grain elevator and shipping terminal along the Columbia River in Boardman, Ore.

With support from a $2.5 million state grant, the co-op plans to build a new rail unloading facility at the 35-year-old terminal, transferring grain from trains onto river barges en route to Portland for export.

Kevin Gray, MCGG general manager, said the project will help relieve rail congestion in the Columbia River Gorge. Trains hauling wheat and corn from the Midwest can instead offload at the Boardman elevator and take advantage of faster, more efficient river transport.

The added bushels also mean more business for the co-op. Gray said they will boost capacity at the elevator by 600,000 bushels, and hire up to five new employees after construction is finished in February 2019.

"This is really a strategic upgrade that's going to add new life to the elevator," Gray said. "From a logistics standpoint, we really think this is going to improve the amount of grain that works its way down the Columbia River system."

Morrow County Grain Growers purchased an interest in the Boardman Grain Elevator in 2013, and co-owns the facility with the Port of Morrow. It is in the port's East Beach Industrial Park, near the Pacific Ethanol plant.

A Union Pacific Railroad main line runs through the port, and the elevator will eventually share a rail loop with the ethanol plant. The port plans to build a 2,200-foot rail spur to the elevator using funding it received from last year's $5.3 billion state transportation package.

"We're excited about the opportunity to accommodate unit train offloading," said Gary Neal, the port's general manager. "Rail continues to be a very strong need for our region. Investing in that piece of infrastructure is very important to the viability of our industries."

Plans to upgrade the Boardman elevator have been in the works for years, according to Gray, but it wasn't until the co-op landed a $2.5 million grant from the Oregon Department of Transportation's ConnectOregon program that they could finally put it all together.

"It is going to be state-of-the-art," Gray said. "If we continue to see congestion on the rails through the Gorge, I think the adoption is going to be huge."

Gray said he expects the facility will handle a "significant number" of trains in its first year. The economic impact will be driven by volume, which he said varies year-to-year based on market conditions.

Even when trains aren't at the elevator, Gray said the offloading site can also be used by local wheat growers trucking in their harvest from the field.

"This is a really big deal for a company like Morrow County," he said.

Cameron Krebs, a Morrow County farmer and chairman of the co-op board, said the project is a major step forward in maintaining relevance for their members.

"As a co-op, our goal as the board of directors is to return profitability to our members," Krebs said. "This is one opportunity to add another competitive component."