

# Visiting every county gives Taylor a sense of Oregon’s agricultural landscape

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Taylor had been to Oregon once before, and was intrigued by the wide diversity of farms and ranches.

“That diversity was attractive to me,” said Taylor, reflecting on her first year at ODA. “I thought it would be challenging, but it also opens a lot of exciting opportunities for agriculture in Oregon.”

Despite some initial hesitation, Taylor applied and was appointed by Gov. Kate Brown in November 2016. Taylor arrived the following month for her Senate confirmation, and celebrated her one-year anniversary on Jan. 23.

At ODA, Taylor manages a department with 370 full-time employees and a most recent biennial budget of \$114.4 million for 2017-19. The USDA Farm and Foreign Agricultural Service had 14,000 employees across three agencies, with \$2 billion in annual salary and expenses.

A big part of Taylor’s first year was simply learning the lay of the land, touring more than 40 farms and ranches across all 36 counties.

“I need that real-life context with farmers and ranchers, so when I’m sitting here in my office with my staff talking about an issue, I’ve gotten to see the people it’s impacting,” she said.

## County tours

Visiting every county gave Taylor a sense of Oregon’s agricultural landscape, as well as how producers are adapting to remain competitive in the marketplace.

She remembers stopping at Thomas Orchards in Grant County, a tree fruit oasis on the high desert. Another stop in Klamath County revealed how farmers there started growing carrots, something they had never done before, at the request of companies struggling to source the crop from drought-stricken California.

“That willingness to try something new, to be innovative, is pretty unique here in Oregon,” Taylor said. “You don’t find it everywhere.”

Innovation extends to new technologies, Taylor added, whether it’s a dairy incorporating computerized milkers or a vineyard flying drones over blocks of wine grapes to pinpoint pest or water stress.

“It’s a lot of fun to work with an industry that is so willing to look at new technologies and push those bounds,” she said.

Taylor’s outreach has already endeared her to producers and industry groups that work closely with the department.

Barry Bushue, who farms in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains and serves as president of the Oregon Farm Bureau, said Taylor has embraced her role at ODA, along with the challenges and complexity of Oregon agriculture.

“This diversity presents a challenge to anyone new to the state and its regulatory programs,” Bushue said via email. “Despite these challenges, Alexis has started to get her legs under her and has embraced her role.”

Jana McKamey, govern-



ODA Director Alexis Taylor visits with organic dairy farmer Jon Bansen in the Willamette Valley near Monmouth, Ore. notforsale



ODA Director Alexis Taylor with Cory Carman, of Carman Ranches, during a tour of Wallowa County in northeastern Oregon. notforsale

ment relations director for the Oregon Winegrowers Association, said Taylor has taken an interest in their industry, and promoting the Oregon wine brand. Taylor was also the keynote speaker at the association’s annual meeting in January.

“She really dove in and wanted to learn more about us,” McKamey said. “We’re interested in helping to develop these markets domestically and internationally to drive more economic development here in the state.”

## Strategic plan

The interactions Taylor had during her cross-state road show helped to inform the department’s new five-year strategic plan, a collaboration between staff and stakeholders that was officially announced earlier this year.

Wherever she went, Taylor said the number one concern was challenges facing the next generation of farmers and ranchers. She pointed to the state Agricultural Heritage

Program, approved by the 2017 Legislature, to develop grants for succession planning and easements. A 12-member commission met for the first time in February to begin writing rules for the program.

Another strategy is outlined under the ODA Strategic Plan under “Key Objective 6,” promoting agriculture as an exciting career choice for students. Taylor calls this the “agriculture is cool” objective.

Citing a 2015 study by the USDA and Purdue University, Taylor said there will be enough college graduates with expertise in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources, or the environment to fill just 61 percent of jobs available in agricultural fields through 2020.

“You don’t just have to farm. You don’t just have to ranch,” Taylor said. “You can work in logistics. You can be a journalist. You can do policymaking. We need the gamut of people.”

The ODA Strategic Plan

goes on to describe how ODA can work more closely with partner agencies and review its policies to ensure farmers’ issues are being addressed across the state, such as water quality and availability, labor shortages and the urban-rural divide.

Tami Kerr, executive director of the Oregon Dairy Farmers Association, said they have also had discussions with Taylor about challenges with the confined animal feeding operation, or CAFO, program. With the industry already hurting from low milk prices, Kerr said it is important to maintain a good working relationship with ODA regulators.

So far, Kerr said she has been impressed by Taylor.

“She’s off to a good start,” Kerr said. “It’s nice that she’s invested time in wanting to meet the producers.”

Ivan Maluski, policy director for Friends of Family Farmers, said his organization has tried to underscore the importance of ODA supporting

small farms. While it hasn’t gone perfectly — Maluski was critical of the department’s approval of Lost Valley Farm, a 30,000-cow dairy in Morrow County that is now being sued by the state for wastewater violations — he said it is clear the door is open to small farm input.

“I’m hopeful there will continue to be receptiveness on things the agency can do to support small and mid-size farms and local food systems,” Maluski said. “I think the signs are encouraging on the whole.”

## Next steps

With year one under her belt, Taylor is showing no signs of letting up on her travel schedule.

She intends to promote regional tours around the state to continue meeting with farmers and local officials, holding roundtable discussions and building on her relationships.

“I’m by no means an expert on all issues that touch agriculture in all parts of the state,” she said. “Continuing to learn is going to be key, and getting out there.”

Taylor is also planning a trade mission to China in May, bringing representatives of roughly a dozen companies to Shanghai. China is an exciting market, she said, as the country is poised to add roughly 160 million middle-class households over the next decade.

“That’s a lot of purchasing power,” she said.

Taylor acknowledged there is uncertainty swirling around federal trade policy, but said the state can play a role in helping Oregon companies build their reputation among export markets. This, she said, was her forte working with the USDA. In fact, Taylor said she has visited every continent except Antarctica in her lifetime.

Nathan Jackson, president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association and general manager of sales and adminis-

tration at K Bar Ranches in Myrtle Creek, Ore., said he is especially encouraged by Taylor’s experience in international trade, which is key for beef producers to earn top dollar for their cattle.

Overseas consumers use more parts of the steer, such as the tongue and offal, that aren’t as desired in the U.S., Jackson said. That value can add up to a little more than \$200 per head.

“(Taylor) knows an awful lot about trade and developing trade in those Asian markets,” Jackson said. “I think that’s exactly what Oregon needs in the department.”

Bushue, with the Oregon Farm Bureau, agreed, saying Taylor’s expertise and passion for international trade are “enormously important” to Oregon agriculture.

Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Nurseries Association, said Taylor came in with big shoes to fill, taking over for her predecessor, Katy Coba, who is now the director of the Oregon Department of Administrative Services and chief operating officer of the state.

However, Stone said Taylor has done a terrific job building bridges and reaching out to every corner of the state.

“She has done a really good job of outreach, not only to the nursery and greenhouse industry,” Stone said. “She has gone to every reach of the state to understand the agricultural community and also its people.”

Taylor said ODA is unique in that it functions as both a regulatory agency, as well as an economic agency. Balancing those two roles can cause tension sometimes, but she said it can also drive them to work toward common sense solutions.

“I guess I view part of my role as being an advocate for agriculture within the governor’s cabinet,” she said. “We want our programs to be nimble, to be flexible, to serve the needs of agriculture.”

# Researchers will also study Wolves prey base

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The money is for a three-year study. Besides looking for wolves, researchers will study the region’s prey base.

Blake said he’s mostly interested in sniffing out wolves. “If we’re ever going to get wolves delisted, we have to find out how many of them are in the South Cascades,” he said. “I firmly believe wolves are there. It is diverse, rugged country.”

Fish and Wildlife wolf policy coordinator Donny Martorello said the department has followed up on credible reports of wolves in the South Cascades. “It’s kind of like finding a needle in a haystack,” he said. “We expect there are at least a few dispersers.”

The state’s 2011 wolf plan holds out the possibility of

moving wolves to energize recovery. The Department of Fish and Wildlife says it’s not necessary. The department maintains wolves will spread out on their own. For several years the department has said recovery goals could be met as soon as 2021.

“I don’t wish wolves on anybody else, but they are not dispersing naturally, like they told us they would,” said Scott Nielsen, president of the Cattle Producers of Washington, many of whose members ranch in northeast Washington. “The wolves are putting an incredible burden on a small portion of the state.”

The state won’t start moving wolves soon, if at all. The budget directs Fish and Wildlife to follow the State Environmental Protection Act and report back to the Legislature by the end of 2019. The act requires a study of

the environmental consequences of state actions.

The House passed a bill directing Fish and Wildlife to do the study. The bill went nowhere in the Senate, but the House policy survived budget negotiations.

The budget also allocates \$80,000 to be split equally between sheriff’s offices in Ferry and Stevens counties for wolf management. Most attacks by wolves on cattle and sheep occur in those two counties.

The counties are dispatching deputies to depredations, even though Fish and Wildlife does the investigations.

Ranchers welcome the involvement of local law officers, Nielsen said.

“I think it will be a tremendously good thing,” he said. “We have confidence in our local sheriffs.”

# Growers can’t be forced to actively create habitat by mowing or plowing

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“We believe that imposing a timing restriction would likely reduce the utility of the special rule for land managers, and could have the unintended side effect of causing landowners to discontinue their habitat creation activities,” the agency said.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity’s lawsuit, the government failed to explain why the exemption would help conserve the species when its population had declined while these “routine” activities were occurring.

The complaint also alleges the Fish and Wildlife Service didn’t provide

evidence that without the exemption, landowners would convert their property to be unsuitable habitat for the lark.

The agency “irrationally eliminated any incentive for agricultural and other interests to take the needs of the lark into consideration” in violation of the Endangered Species Act and the Administrative Procedure Act, the lawsuit claims.

Aside from asking a federal judge to invalidate the 4(d) special rule, the environmental group has requested the species be upgraded to “endangered” status, under which such an exemption isn’t permissible.

Unless current farm practices are protected under the 4(d) rule, farmers may be more likely to switch to crops like hazelnuts or blueberries, which don’t provide habitat for the bird, said Mary Anne Cooper, public policy counsel for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

Growers can’t be forced to actively create habitat by mowing or plowing, she said.

Environmental groups are generally opposed to exemptions for agriculture under the 4(d) rule, not only for the lark but also for other species, Cooper said.

“They don’t like the tool,” she said.