Lost Valley Farm founder jailed on meth charge

By PHIL WRIGHT
EO Media Group

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HERMISTON, Ore. — The founder of Oregon's second-largest dairy found himself Friday in police handcuffs.

Hermiston police arrested Greg te Velde, 60, on a charge of felony methamphetamine possession. The resident of Tipton, Calif., was not alone. Police also arrested Sarah Cook, 38, of Hermiston on the same charge.

Officers contacted the pair late Friday during a traffic stop in the parking lot near her apartment complex at 630 S.E. Sixth St., according to Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston.

"Officers discovered suspected methamphetamine and smoking devices in plain view," he stated, and te Velde was in possession of $7,400 cash. The police chief also reported te Velde "admitted to buying and using methamphetamine earlier in the evening with Cook."

Officers detained the pair and searched the vehicle, where they found several grams of what appeared to be methamphetamine. Police arrested te Velde and Cook and booked them into the Umatilla County Jail in nearby Pendleton. Officers also seized the $7,400 and cited te Velde for driving on a suspended license and failing to drive on the right side of the road.

"This arrest was the start of the weekend for the team of officers that was late shift," Edmiston said an in email. "Our officers were extremely busy making several drug and DUII arrests. We are aware Mr. Tevelde is facing numerous charges from more than one entity. We have been in consultation with the Umatilla County District Attorney's Office."

Court and police records also used the name "Tevelde."

Te Velde founded the Lost Valley Farm, near Boardman, plus two dairies in California — GJ te Velde Ranch, Tipton, and Pacific Rim Dairy, Corcoran. He also brought on himself a slew of financial, personal and legal troubles, including drug abuse and patronizing prostitutes.

A California bankruptcy court in September wrested control of the farms from te Velde and appointed a trustee to oversee their operations.

National farm debt continues to rise

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Debt financing has long played a critical role in the capital-intensive U.S. farm sector, but the level of debt is growing and gaining more attention as farm income continues to decline.

Brent Gloy

Total indebtedness now stands at $407 billion, up 46 percent since 2010.

Adjusted for inflation and other factors, farm debt is approaching the peak levels seen in the late 1970s before the farm crisis of the 1980s, Brent Gloy, a partner at Agricultural Economics Insights, said in the consulting firm's weekly update.

"If it were to grow roughly another 4 percent in 2019, something that seems fairly likely at present, it would eclipse the previous high," he said.

The situation is not on the scale of the farm crisis in the 1980s, but it is not good, either, Gloy told Capital Press.

Real estate debt has accounted for most of the increase. At $248 billion, it currently accounts for 61 percent of total debt, compared to 55 percent of total debt in 2010, he said.

There is room for real estate debt to rise. In Iowa, for instance, a large percentage of farmland isn't mortgaged. Whether increasing real estate debt is a good idea is another question, he said.

People are going to have to decide how much more debt they are willing to add, and lenders might not be willing to lend a lot more, he said.

There has also been a large decline in financial assets, which have fallen $62 billion, or 50 percent, from 2010, he said.

"I think it's going to be a tough winter unless something changes. When people see their lender at the end of the year, next spring, I think there is going to be a lot of scrutiny on loans," he said.

While the situation is not as bad as the dramatic downturn in the '80s, it does share some of the same elements, with uncertainty over trade deals reminiscent of the shocks going on at that time, he said. "Agriculture is so dependent on exports — anytime you monkey around with that, it causes big disruptions," he said.

Commodities have to go to places they're not now going, and there's a reason they're not going to those markets — transaction costs are high, he said. So prices have to fall to get them to go where they don't want to. People don't realize how high those costs are, and right now it's substantial, he said.

It's uncharted water for agriculture and really hard to predict how long the trade problem is going to exist, and it's changed the dynamic in the marketplace, he said.

Forests, farmland identified as mercury pollution sources

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

Trees are harvested in Oregon's Cascade Mountains. In the context of land use, forests and farmland have been identified as the main sources of mercury pollution in the Willamette Basin, according to a modeling study commissioned by Oregon's environmental regulators.

Forests and farmland are identified as the major sources of mercury pollution in the Willamette Basin's waterways in a modeling study commissioned by Oregon's environmental regulators.

The finding reflects the extent to which agriculture and timber are major land uses in the region and doesn't necessarily blame them for causing pollution.

Nonetheless, Oregon's natural resource industries are troubled by the implication they'll be expected to shoulder most of the regulatory burden to reduce the mercury load.

"It will have a serious effect on people's bottom lines for a problem they're not even creating," said Mary Anne Cooper, public policy counsel for the Oregon Farm Bureau.

Mercury is a neurotoxin that's naturally found in the soil but also travels through the air from coal-burning plants in China and gets deposited on the ground in Oregon through rain.

Forestry and agriculture advocates are troubled by a modeling study conducted by Tetra Tech, an environmental consulting firm hired by Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality.

The study indicates environmental regulation can't control the major cause of mercury pollution, since it's coming from overseas, but it can address the "fraction of the load that reaches streams" through erosion.

"You can't achieve the target concentration without addressing the atmospheric deposition," said John Butcher, an environmental engineer at Tetra Tech, during a Sept. 19 meeting in Wilsonville, Ore.

At this point, the modeling study is simply Tetra Tech's opinion, rather than official DEQ policy.

However, since the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Oregon's DEQ — which enforces federal water quality standards — cannot stop China from burning coal, natural resource industry advocates worry they will be expected to solve a problem they didn't cause.

Because of the steep reduction in mercury pollution that DEQ determined was necessary to comply with the Clean Water Act, it's possible that even the most stringent restrictions on tilling and logging wouldn't sufficiently lower mercury levels in fish. Activities that disturb the soil lead to erosion, with the mercury-laden sediment winding up in waterways.

The median concentration of mercury in fish tissue is currently 0.15 milligrams per kilogram. Under the "total maximum daily load" determined by DEQ, the maximum level of mercury would have to fall to 0.04 milligrams per kilogram.

Atmospheric deposition is estimated to contribute 34 percent of the Willamette basin's mercury load, while sediment contributes to about 43 percent. However, much of the mercury in that sediment comes from historic atmospheric deposits.

In the context of land use, the model estimates that forestland represents 45 percent of the mercury load source, followed by shrubland — which is mostly disturbed forests — at 20 percent.

Row crops were found to represent 7 percent of the load source, while the "other" category — which includes pasture and hay ground — was estimated at 11 percent. Altogether, these sources represent 83 percent of the mercury load.

Heath Curtiss, government affairs director for the Oregon Forest Industries Council, fears it's possible that even if all forestry and farming were shut down in Oregon, mercury pollution would still exceed the DEQ's standard.

"This water quality modeling proves this standard is unattainable," he said. "There is literally nothing we can do to meet those target reductions."

Arguably, farms and forests are actually "sequestering" much of the mercury by capturing the element in soil and plants, preventing all of it from going directly into waterways, said Mary Anne Cooper of the Oregon Farm Bureau.

The modeling study doesn't acknowledge the erosion-prevention measures that farmers have already taken, she said. "It doesn't take into account cover cropping, it doesn't take into account riparian buffers, it doesn't take into account restoration work or conservation tillage."

Objections were also raised about the data used in the modeling study, much of which was collected in the 1990s, before such methods were as commonly employed by Oregon's farmers and foresters.

"I had hair in the 1990s, which has very little relevance for today," said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

Gene Foster, DEQ's watershed management manager, said the agency won't ignore the strides made by natural resource industries in controlling erosion.

"We recognize a lot has happened to keep soil on the land over the past years," he said. "We will be able to take those into account in our water quality management development."

The EPA and DEQ are under a tight court-ordered deadline to revise how the state deals with mercury pollution.

In 2017, a judge ruled the way that EPA and DEQ had decided to implement the "total maximum daily load" standard was insufficiently strict and gave the agencies two years to revise their methods. That deadline is coming up next April, which is why DEQ has commissioned the modeling study and assembled an advisory group to confer on its plans.

At this point, the modeling study hasn't identified which sources of mercury pollution are human-caused or would occur without logging or tilling, Foster said. The study currently differentiates among land use sources of the mercury load regardless of human activity.

Though it's unclear whether the water quality standard can be achieved through regulation, the modeling study is the best science available to the agency, he said.

As the state implements the TMDL standard to reduce the mercury load, regulators will monitor the basin water system and respond with "adaptive management," Foster said.

"As things progress, we learn more and adapt accordingly," he said.

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