

Avoiding big risks on small farms

Seminar discusses pitfalls for small farmers during annual conference

By **GEORGE PAVLEN**
Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — While a prevailing school of thought among some business owners is to take big risks and embrace possible failure, Ellen Polishuk says farming is not like other businesses.

The difference, Polishuk said, is most farms survive and thrive based on execution, as opposed to innovation. Fail to grow healthy crops, or operate machinery safely, and the consequences can be severe.

“We’re risk-takers already because we chose agriculture, one of the riskiest realms to work in,” Polishuk said in a presentation Feb. 23 at the Oregon Small Farms Conference, hosted by Oregon State University in Corvallis. “I don’t think we need to celebrate here this idea of, yeah, you just keep trying.”

Rather than celebrate failure, Polishuk, a farm



Ellen Polishuk, a Washington, D.C.-based farm consultant, led a workshop titled “Learning from Failure” at the annual Oregon Small Farms Conference at Oregon State University on Feb. 23.

consultant based in Washington, D.C., stressed the importance of working together and learning from past failures to avoid future setbacks.

Prior to founding her consulting company, Plant to Profit, Polishuk spent 25 years farming herbs, vegetables and fresh cut flowers in northern Virginia. She identified several areas where farms can fail, including poor management practices, choice of markets, health, safety and planning.

Class participants shared mistakes they made in working their own farms

— including Polishuk, who recalled an incident where one employee hit herself on the head using a metal post driver. The lesson, Polishuk said, is making sure farms offer workers compensation to avoid risking lawsuits and losing close relationships.

Polishuk remembered another story where her neighbor, while working alone, managed to run himself over with a tractor. The man was OK, but Polishuk said it emphasized the importance of paying close attention to safety features on machinery and making

sure there is someone to help in an emergency.

“This is a dangerous game, when machinery is involved,” she said.

Farmers also need to pay attention to their own physical and mental well-being, Polishuk said. She recommended doing yoga stretches to keep the body from breaking down, and seeing a counselor to help deal with the day-to-day stresses of running a farm.

“It’s great to have one, 45-minute session a week that’s completely devoted to your (situation),” Polishuk said.

At the end of the day, Polishuk said farms need to turn a profit to stay in business, which is why it is so critical to choose crops that can make money and are well suited for the land.

Perhaps more than anything, Polishuk said, new or beginning farmers should realize they do not need to go it alone.

“Figuring things out on your own doesn’t usually work, and if it does, it usually takes a lot of time,” she said. “There are a lot of ways to exercise this impulse (to farm), and not have to do every single thing yourself from square zero.”



A Reinke linear system irrigates corn in Oregon's Willamette Valley. Oregon lawmakers are considering bills that would increase water usage reporting, create a task force to study water measurement and reporting and allocate \$9 million for groundwater studies.

Increased Oregon water reporting debated

Other bills would create task force, allocate \$9 M for groundwater research

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

More irrigators could be required to report water usage to Oregon regulators under proposed legislation that agriculture groups worry will have unintended consequences and limited benefits.

Under House Bill 2851, the Oregon Water Resources Department would be authorized to require more irrigators to report their water usage, which the Oregon Farm Bureau believes could have negative impacts.

Specifically, due to irrigation efficiency improvements, some farmers don’t use the full amount of water to which they’re entitled under their water rights, said Mary Anne Cooper, the group’s vice president of public policy.

“Reporting underuse on a consistent basis may result in forfeiture proceedings against a farmer,” she said.

It’s also uncertain what would happen under HB 2851 if an equipment malfunction prevented growers from being able to report water usage mid-season, Cooper said. Would the farmer simply report the malfunction or would he be considered out of compliance with the law?

The proposal’s practical advantages are unclear since the Oregon Water Resources Department doesn’t have the capacity to analyze the data that irrigators could be

required to report, she said. “It effectively goes into a void because they have not had the staff or resources to do much with it in recent years.”

Currently, entities such as irrigation districts and municipalities must measure and report their water usage, with reporting required for about 16 percent of the water rights in Oregon. Local watermasters can require water to be measured by other irrigators, but that information doesn’t have to be reported to OWRD.

The water usage data submitted by irrigation districts is largely used as a “litigation tool” by outside groups seeking to take away water rights, said April Snell, executive director of the Oregon Water Resources Congress, which represents irrigation districts.

“Bluntly, that information is useless to just about everybody,” she said. Waterwatch of Oregon, an environmental group, believes that water usage reporting is a “basic common sense tool” that would let OWRD better understand water availability when issuing permits and protect existing water rights holders, said Kimberly Priestley, the group’s senior policy analyst.

“This is not a measurement and reporting bill. This is just a reporting bill,” she said. “This bill will simply expand the state’s toolbox.”

Small Farms Conference offers classes, networking

By **GEORGE PAVLEN**
Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — For Elliott and Rae VanZandt, getting into their first farmers’ market last year proved to be a learning experience.

The couple, from Klamath Falls, Ore., tends a small garden with squash, zucchini, garlic and other produce, as well as an assortment of wildflowers. While Elliott said they enjoy growing their own food, he never before considered selling at the local market.

He and Rae came Feb. 23 to the Oregon Small Farms Conference at Oregon State University in Corvallis, looking for ways to improve their farm stand heading into year two. One lesson in hindsight, Elliott said, was they probably focused too much on crop diversity, and not enough on quantity.

“We weren’t predictable for our customers,” he said. “We just want to refine, and get better.”

As the farm manager for Dragonfly Transitions —



Elliott and Rae VanZandt, of Klamath Falls, Ore., said they came to the Oregon Small Farms Conference on Feb. 23 seeking to improve their farmers’ market garden heading into year two.

a therapeutic training and mentoring group for young adults in Southern Oregon — Rae is no stranger to running a successful farm, though she said she gained a lot at the conference by hearing from other farmers about their past experiences and mistakes.

“It was really experiential, which I think farming totally is,” she said.

More than 900 people from across the state gathered at OSU for the annual

Small Farms Conference, featuring a full day of educational talks on topics ranging from growing techniques to markets to bills under consideration at the Oregon Legislature. A trade show was also split between two buildings, the LaSells Stewart Center and CH2M Alumni Center, on campus.

Lauren Gwin, associate director for the OSU Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems, said small farms are a not only a

key part of the state’s agricultural economy, but also environmental sustainability. Of approximately 35,000 total farms in Oregon, about 32,000 are classified as small farms under the USDA’s definition, meaning they make less than \$350,000 in annual income.

“They are a huge part of our state,” Gwin said. “These farmers contribute to our dinner tables, they contribute to clean water and clean air, and they contribute to the vibrancy of our communities.”

In many cases, Gwin said small farmers serve as the face of local agriculture at farmers’ markets in larger cities, creating a link across the urban-rural divide.

The Center for Small Farms, through OSU Extension Service, offers a variety of classes and networking opportunities for small farmers to find their niche and connect to markets. Gwin said the conference also gives farmers a sense of community, and a shot of excitement for the season to come.

Bill would eliminate ‘high-value’ status for cranberries

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Economic troubles in the cranberry industry have spurred a proposal to reduce the difficulty of building

dwellings on Oregon farmland dedicated to the crop.

Proponents of House Bill 2573 say it’s intended to allow farmers to live on the same property where they grow cranberries, which have

severely dropped in price due to an oversupply in recent years. The bill would remove cranberries from the list of high-value crops under Oregon land use laws, effectively lowering the income threshold for building a home on farm property from \$80,000 to \$40,000 a year.

Farmers want to be able to reside on the same land

they cultivate, which often isn’t possible in the cranberry industry’s current downturn, according to supporters of HB 2573.

“The ability to put a farm house on there and live and work at the same place becomes much more important for people,” said Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay, during a recent legislative hearing.

Coos and Curry counties are the primary cranberry-growing areas in Oregon, which generated about \$10.4 million from the crop in 2016 — down from about \$36 million nearly a decade earlier, said Melissa Cribbins, a Coos County commissioner.

Cribbins said the bill wouldn’t “open a large door” to new development since cranberry production

is highly localized in Oregon and limited to land that’s generally not suitable for growing other high-value crops.

“It’s not like there would be no criteria at all. They would have to meet a \$40,000 test to build on their property,” she said. “We’re trying to keep people growing cranberries and not get them out of the business.”

The Oregon Farm Bureau is “comfortable” with the legislation moving forward, said Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of public policy for the organization, noting that some growers may be compelled to switch from cranberry production to other farm uses meet a lower annual income test.

The 1,000 Friends of Oregon conservation group is opposed to HB 2573 partly because it’s a “slippery slope” to eliminate one crop from the list of high-value crops,

potentially removing protections against “nonfarm developments such as golf courses,” said Meriel Darzen, rural lands attorney for the group. The proposal raised concerns among some lawmakers on the House Committee on Agriculture and Land Use, which is considering HB 2573.

Rep. Ken Helm, D-Beaverton, cited a determination by Oregon’s Department of Land Conservation and Development that the bill could allow for “golf courses, private parks and landfills” in addition to farm dwellings.

“I’m worried about conversion from agricultural uses altogether,” Helm said.

The committee’s chair, Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem, recalled efforts by a major Southern Oregon pear company to change land use laws to ease housing development.

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