Success: The couple started raising chickens in the mid-1980s

Continued from Page 1

Small farms grow

Small farms — those ranging from 1 to 9 acres — make up 32.2% of Washington's farms, according to the USDA 2017 Ag Census. More than 11,500 farms are less than 10 acres, out of a total of nearly 36,000 farms in the state.

Nationally, more than 273,000 small farms make up roughly 13.3% of more than 2 million total farms.

Sue, 60, is a fourth-generation farmer. Her family raised vegetables, chickens and rabbits in the suburbs of Phoenix, Ariz.

Paul, 61, is a lifelong Otis Orchards resident. His family truck-farmed and kept a large garden as he grew up, selling raspberries and offering U-pick crops.

They have three adult children, who help on the farm when they can.

Paul still keeps a full-time job as a technical drafter, a job he's held for 40 years. Sue does not work outside the farm.

The farm is profitable each year, Paul said.

"We can't live off that profit, at this point, but it does make money," he said. "I tell people it makes enough to make me want to do it again."

Chicken and egg

Paul and Sue both say their parents raised chickens while they were growing up.

Paul's parents started when he was 5 years old.

"My mother always had chickens and it was, 'OK, Sunday's coming up, chicken dinner,'" Sue said. "She would just go out, 'Eeny meeny miney, moe, who's bugging me the most?' Wring the neck, plucked them. ... 'I've got too many roosters, which one of you are the meanest?' and it would hit the pot. We would have chicken, whether it was roast chicken, fried chicken, chicken-and-dumplings or whatever. That's the way I grew up."

The couple started raising chickens in the mid-1980s, in a tiny barn with less than a dozen chickens providing eggs for their family.

They'd always have a surplus, so they put a sign out by the road: "Eggs for sale."

"Of course, people will stop and buy eggs," Paul said.

They then began selling eggs at the farmers' market.

They can raise up to 120 chickens in the small building where they keep the birds.

Feed and straw for bedding are their biggest expense.

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Paul Puhek leads a Washington State University Cultivating Success class on his 3-acre farm in Otis Orchards, Wash., the morning of Oct. 19.

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Paul Puhek offers students in a Washington State University Cultivating Success class a look at the different ways he packages his eggs Oct. 19 on his farm in Otis Orchards, Wash.

"When you're buying chickens, the baby chicks are anywhere from $3 to $4 apiece," Sue said. "It takes six months for that baby chick to lay an egg. So you're feeding this $4 baby chick for six months feed that's about $18 or so a bag until they start laying."

After that six months, she said, the chickens lay eggs "like gangbusters" for the first year. After that, their productivity begins to taper off.

"I always figure first year is 100%," Paul said. "Second year is going to be around 75% or 80%. Third year, you're looking at 60%. After that, you probably should get new chickens."

The Puheks plan to run their chickens for two years. For their older birds, they hope to find a butcher, a big need for small-scale farmers in the area.

Chefs have expressed interest in buying their spent layer hens, which they say have more flavor, but the chickens must be processed at a USDA facility to be sold.

It would be an added value, Paul said, but there's a one- to two-year waiting list to rent portable slaughter facilities.

How did they get rid of the birds from their previous flock?

"I put an ad on Craigslist that said, 'Free chickens,'" Paul said. "I got like 10 to 12 responses in half an hour."

Raising vegetables

Produce accounts for the other half of the operation. The Puheks started farming after getting married in 1980.

"We were living in a trailer in a trailer park, and we literally tore up the backyard and planted vegetables," Sue said. "Not only were we feeding us, we were feeding the neighbors."

They're always looking for different varieties of vegetables, new and old.

"Typically, if we don't like it, we don't think our customers will like it," Paul said.

Sue is a certified master food preserver, so she can educate customers about canning, dehydrating and freezing if they purchase 5 pounds of carrots and aren't sure what to do with them.

"Sometimes you have to not only develop your customer, you're developing a market," Paul said.

Approachability is key when selling at the farmers' market, the Puheks say. They've seen other vendors grumble about answering customers' questions all day, or sit in the back of the booth and ignore the people they hope will buy from them.

The Puheks also test their produce so they know how to advise their customers. For example, they experimented with purple carrots, now one of their top sellers, Sue said.

"We sell out of those first," Paul agreed. "You can throw the produce out on a table and stand there, and hope it goes, or you can say, 'Hey, come take a look at this.'"

Year-round operation

But the farmers' market only lasts 22 weeks each year. For chicken farmers, that creates a quandary: The chickens don't stop laying once the market season is over.

"If you have 100 chickens, you're going to get 80 eggs a day," Paul said.

In the off-season, the Puheks sell their eggs through the LINC Foods co-op to wholesale or straight to retail.

"They're one of the last few really functioning farms in Otis Orchards, which is a historically important agricultural district in our region," said Beth Robinette, co-founder of LINC Foods. "They've been able to keep that going in that area."

The Puheks sell their eggs for $5 a dozen at farmers' markets or $3 to $4 per dozen to the co-op.

Their cost of production is roughly $2.25 to $2.50 per dozen.

The Puheks expect to remain profitable, even with the delay in egg production as the new flock matures.

Produce profitable

Produce is also profitable, but they are at the mercy of the weather, Sue said. Costs are relatively low, as long as the couple watches their inputs and doesn't have a crop loss.

When planting produce, Paul said, the couple factors in expected demand, including what they had too much or too little of the previous year.

"Everything you grow has to have somewhere to go," he said. "If you grow it and don't sell it, it's actually costing you money — the cost of taking care of that produce, harvesting it, the seed — if it rots or gets sowed underground, it's not just a lost sale, it's lost revenue. You're spending money on produce you're not selling."

Getting started

When they teach classes to beginning farmers, Sue tells students chickens are one of the easiest types of livestock to raise.

"They're not too picky about where they live, what they eat, and you wind up getting eggs and meat," she said.

Paul and Sue warn beginning farmers to be ready for chickens when they arrive.

Paul recommends having all infrastructure in place before buying.

They've seen too many instances of people purchasing chicks on a whim.

"They have nowhere to put them — they're raising chickens in their bathtub or sticking them in a box in their laundry room," Paul said. "OK, now they're too big for the laundry room — where do they go?"

The Puheks have designed their operation to make things most efficient for them, not for the birds.

"The chickens don't care," Sue said. "I'm sure you've seen on the Internet the cute little tiny houses and stuff for chickens. I'm looking at that going, 'How the heck am I going to clean that? How am I going to get into it? How am I going to water, how am I going to feed?'"

Giving back

The Puheks practice the three parts of sustainable farming — community, business and taking care of the land, said Munts, the WSU Extension small farms coordinator.

"(They're) a good demonstration of how you can manage at a scale and still make a profit, but still maintain jobs and everything else," she said.

Munts is particularly impressed with the Puheks' willingness to share their successes with other small-scale farmers.

"I can't say enough about how they'll say, 'Yes,' every time I call them," she said. "They're just so community-minded, it's just wonderful."

Timber: 'Settlements can occur at any time'

Continued from Page 1

when they decide to change our deal," DiLorenzo said.

If the state government decides to challenge the validity of contracts with the counties, or argue that it has "sovereign immunity" that prohibits such lawsuits, the litigation may continue for years before the Oregon Court of Appeals and the Oregon Supreme Court, he said.

However, the county plaintiffs will try to convert the jury award into a court judgment as soon as possible, at which point the State of Oregon may be liable for 9% annual interest if it eventually loses the case — increasing the verdict by $90 million a year, he said.

"Certainly, they can talk to us about settling the case," DiLorenzo said. "Settlements can occur at any time."

When asked if a potential settlement would involve a change to Oregon's state forest policies, DiLorenzo said there's an "infinite" number of ways the problem could be ironed out, and may involved the Legislature weighing in on the situation.

"I hope our current governor gets interested in resolving this in a way that will help the people in these rural towns," he said.

Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

Trees are logged in an Oregon forest with a feller-buncher in this Capital Press file photo. A jury verdict awarding counties $1 billion for the State of Oregon's alleged breach of contract is expected to raise questions about forest management.

Charles Boyle, press secretary for Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, said the verdict "was not an unexpected first step in what will be a lengthier legal process, and it would be premature at this point to make budget decisions based on the jury's decision."

Linn County, the lead plaintiff, will soon be discussing the verdict with other plaintiff counties and taxing districts but is appreciative of the jury's decision, said Roger Nyquist, a Linn County commissioner.

"Going forward, this will create a lot of conversations and I think that's a good thing," Nyquist said.

The Wild Salmon Center and several other non-profit groups tried to intervene in the case as defendants, but a state judge denied the request because the lawsuit dealt with contractual rather than environmental concerns.

Ralph Bloemers, an attorney with the Crag Law Center who represented those groups, said he expects the jury's verdict will be overturned on appeal.

"Since Oregon acquired these logged over lands in the Great Depression, Oregonians have invested millions of our tax dollars in fixing them for everyone's benefit," Bloemers said. "While we all use and enjoy wood products, state law recognizes that our forests also provide us with clean drinking water, fish and wildlife."

Milk: Cow numbers in the U.S. are up

Continued from Page 1

And he's not expecting any surges in milk production, globally or in the U.S.

Milk cow numbers in the U.S. in October were up 5,000 head from September but were still down 40,000 head from October 2018. Milk production per cow was up 1.7% year over year, leading to a 1.3% increase in milk.

University extension agents across the country are reporting forage quality at average to poor and forage supplies at average to short, which will likely affect production per cow, Stephenson said.

"I just do not see milk production coming on strong with finances stressing farmers for expansion, feed quality and production per cow, replacement numbers and farmers still exiting," Cropp said.

He's expecting Class III milk prices in the strong $17s in the first half of the year and into the $18s in the second half.

Stephenson's forecast is in the same ballpark and maybe even a little higher by the end of next year, he said.

"Certainly this is a good year, and next year is likely to be somewhat better," he said.

Barring anything that would affect demand, "things look a lot rosier for 2020" than the past 4-1/2 years, Cropp said.