

Rural: ‘I don’t know of a farmer who wants to be a bad neighbor’

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farmland were converted to low-density residential use during the five-year period that ended in 2016.

Across the Pacific Northwest and in California, the hunger for country living drove the conversion of 267,728 acres of farmland to low-density residential lots between 2001 and 2016, according to the trust.

In southwest Idaho, the appeal of living in farm country helps drive the population growth. The Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho in 2020 pegged the population of Ada County, which includes Boise and Meridian, at 502,970, up 28% from 2010.

Next door, in mainly agricultural Canyon County, which includes Nampa and Caldwell, the population is 234,820, up 24% during the same 10 years.

But living in farm country can take some getting used to, both on the part of new arrivals and farmers.

Sid Freeman, who farms near Caldwell, said some new rural residents view agriculture as an inconvenience as they encounter farm equipment on the roads, for example. He chalks it up to a lack of appreciation for the farm sector’s value.

“We are producing the safest, cheapest and most reliable food source in the world,” he said.

“I always try to be a good neighbor,” said another farmer, Dave Reynolds, who owns farming and dairy operations near Kuna.

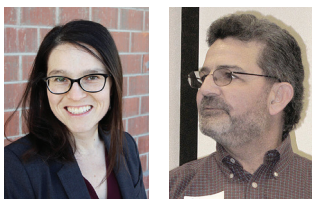
He and his crew frequently interact with the people who live nearby.

“Some want to know every time we spray,” Reynolds said. “Or they want to know when we are going to spread manure or spray at night” to keep pollinators such as bees out of harm’s way.

The notifications take time, he said. Farming is a low-margin business, “and we don’t get paid for that. But



Laura and Steve Wilder



Addie Candib

Sid Freeman

it’s good for education.”

“I don’t know of a farmer who wants to be a bad neighbor,” Reynolds said.

Neil Durrant of Big D Ranch, a farming and crop-marketing business between Meridian and Kuna, said he expects the region’s population growth to continue.

“We try to adapt our operation,” he said. “A lot of land we own butts up against development ground.”

Durrant said Big D has acquired equipment that folds or is easier to maneuver on roads where traffic is increasing. On rented fields made smaller by development, he’s exploring opportunities to grow higher-value crops.

Patience required

Living in farm country often requires more patience — and work — than people realize.

Kuna-area residents Jack and Lori Blattner live on 4 acres that are part of a larger property that has been in the family 103 years. Most of the land is leased to farmers.

Jack teaches agriculture in a neighboring school district, and Lori is an executive at a

FARMLAND DEVELOPMENT, 2001-2016

• **4.1 million:** The number of acres of U.S. farmland converted to urban and highly developed land uses.

• **Nearly 7 million:** The number of acres converted to low-density residential use.

• **465,900:** The number of acres of California farmland converted to urban or highly developed uses or low-density residential use.

• **65,800:** the number of acres of Oregon farmland that was developed.

• **97,800:** The number of acres of Washington farmland that was developed.

• **68,800:** The number of acres of Idaho farmland that was developed.

Source: American Farmland Trust “Farms Under Threat” report.

Boise company.

They’ve lived there since well before the road in front of their house became a high-traffic route connecting fast-growing towns.

People buy 1 to 5 acres because they don’t want to have neighbors, “and when they get there, they don’t realize the amount of work it takes to care for that ground,” Jack Blattner said.

The Blattners have sheep and frequently work on projects and repairs on their acreage.

“Being able to fix things is pretty valuable, I suppose, but I wish I knew more about lots of stuff,” Jack Blattner said. “That’s when you go ask for help.”

Lori Blattner remembers when a new neighbor bought 11 acres, put about 25 horses on it “and had no idea how much food horses eat.” The neighbor eventually sold and



Lori and Jack Blattner

ment, livestock, hay-baling or harvesting.

“It’s generally very peaceful and quiet on the farm,” she said. “However, when we are weaning lambs or the neighbors are weaning calves, there is a lot of ruckus and some sleepless nights. This is an annual occurrence and part of the territory. ... You catch up on sleep when you can.”

Trespassing worries

Trespassing can also be an issue.

The Wilders said a canal bank they own has been used as a public greenbelt. Some people have even used their private road to access it.

“We have people, because they Google it, see a road and just drive down the road,” Steve Wilder said.

The Idaho Legislature in 2018 updated the trespass statutes, and this year is considering limiting landowner liability when people enter private land for recreation.

Another bill would update statutes on rights of way and easements for irrigation ditches, canals and conduits. The state also has a longstanding “right-to-farm” law that allows normal farm activities to continue unimpeded.

Easements can also be a point of contention.

“One of the things we are seeing in recent years is an increase in disputes involving ditch easements,” said Paul Arrington, executive

director and general counsel with the Idaho Water Users Association.

Roger and Gayle Batt live on part of Gayle’s family farm between Wilder and Homedale. Gayle is a former state legislator. Roger administers a handful of agricultural organizations.

Growth brings issues that range from trash and debris in canals to greater cross-pollination risk for seed-crop fields, Roger Batt said. Weeds can proliferate on some fields that have been taken out of ag production but are not yet developed.

“Over the last 10 years even out here where we live, we hardly know our neighbors anymore,” he said. “A lot of us are questioning what agriculture is going to look like in 10 or 20 years” in the Treasure Valley.

Gayle Batt said the growth has changed “the culture of how we deal with each other.”

Addie Candib, with American Farmland Trust’s Northwest region, said factors driving growth in farm country include developers looking for land that’s easy to build on from technical, cost and regulatory standpoints.

More development

Colleen Agresta grew up around agriculture and once raised llamas. Greg Agresta earlier lived on an acreage on a hill north of Redding, Calif. They lived near a golf course before moving to Idaho from the Redding area.

“At this time of our lives, it’s less stressful,” Colleen Agresta said. “It’s beautiful. ... I love it here.”

But the demand for small acreages continues.

The Agrestas recently received a notice that a development of homes on large lots is planned on 40 acres of a nearby pasture.

Greg said that while they were disappointed, they still will see plenty of farm-related activities ... “as soon as we drive out of our neighborhood.”

Dairies: Oregon has consistently been ranked as a top quality milk producer

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Newton, organizer for the Stand Up to Factory Farms Coalition, which supports SB 583.

The bill’s proponents made several claims for why a moratorium on dairies with more than 2,500 cows should be imposed:

- **Water:** Nitrogen from lagoons and manure spread onto fields can leach into groundwater, while large dairies draw enormous amounts of water for cattle, operations and irrigation, supporters said.
- **Air:** Dairies are sources

of methane and other greenhouse gases that contribute to haze, health problems and climate change, supporters said.

“The climate crisis is already upon us and we have no time to spare to curb emissions,” said Amy Van Saun, senior attorney with the Center for Food Safety nonprofit.

• **Economics:** Overproduction from industrial dairies has driven down milk prices to the point that small farms can’t cover their operational costs, causing many to go out of business, supporters said.

• **Animal welfare:** Cows in industrial dairies may be

in stalls without access to the outdoors or the opportunity to move around, requiring antibiotics to stave off udder infections and other diseases, supporters said.

Under such “intensive confinement,” cows are more likely to be treated “like machines than conscious living beings,” said Jennifer Hauge, legislative affairs manager for the Animal Legal Defense Fund.

Opponents of SB 583 pointed out that all dairies are prohibited from discharging waste into groundwater or surface waters and must

only apply manure at agronomic rates that can be used by plants. The bill’s critics argued that dairies should be judged by their environmental performance and regulatory compliance, rather than an arbitrary standard such as size.

Large dairies have invested in covered lagoons and anaerobic methane digesters that trap gases for electricity production, critics said. In addition to those features, the state’s biggest operation — Threemile Canyon Farms — has also set aside significant acreage for habitat conserva-

tion and won awards for animal welfare.

Oregon has consistently been ranked as a top-quality milk producer, which indicates that cows are kept in good conditions, the bill’s opponents said.

The trend toward bigger dairies is driven by stricter regulations and labor requirements, which have forced companies to produce more revenue to cover fixed costs, critics said.

Dairies have also grown to accommodate demand for their products, much like other private companies, said

Brandon Hazenberg, a Marion County dairy farmer. “Nobody has a problem with their growth but animal agriculture is an easy target.”

Smaller dairies would suffer from a prohibition on large operations because they alone can’t sustain the livelihoods of veterinarians, agronomists and other industry experts, said Bobbi Harrold, a Linn County dairy farmer.

“If you remove the large operations, you remove the opportunity for those professionals to have steady business,” she said.

Easterday: Company formed in 2019 after the purchase of the former Lost Valley Farm

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made in 2017 and 2018 to avoid scrutiny and discipline, according to the CFTC complaint.

Easterday allegedly ran up more than \$200 million in losses over 10 years from speculative trading in the cattle and corn futures markets. To meet margin calls, Easterday allegedly defrauded one of the feedlot’s biggest business partners of more than \$233 million, according to the complaint.

The complaint does not name the producer, and a CFTC spokeswoman said the commission could not identify the producer.

The complaint says the producer is based in South Dakota and operates a beef processing plant in Pasco and is “part of a family of companies that together constitute one of the largest food suppliers in the world,” a profile that fits Tyson Fresh Meats, which is based in Dakota Dunes, S.D.

Tyson has previously said that it led an investigation last year and found that the misappropriation of funds had cost the company more than \$200 million.

Easterday had an agreement with the company to procure and care for 145,000

to 180,000 head of cattle a year, according to the complaint.

The complaint alleges that from at least October 2016 to November 2020, Easterday submitted false invoices and reimbursement requests for cattle that it never purchased or raised for the producer.

“Given the parties’ long business relationship, the producer justifiably relied on the invoices submitted by Easterday Ranches and paid Easterday Ranches more than \$233 million to which it was not entitled,” the complaint states.

A producer’s representative confronted Easterday with evidence of the fraud last fall, according to the complaint.

The commission seeks restitution, civil monetary penalties, and permanent trading and registration bans.

According to the plea agreement with the Justice Department in which he pleaded guilty to wire fraud, Easterday will have to set aside no less than 10% of his monthly income toward paying restitution.

Easterday Ranches filed for bankruptcy in February, and Cody Easterday resigned as an officer of the business, according to court records.

Dairy plans

Cody Easterday’s son, Cole Easterday, said April 1 that other family members still plan to reopen Oregon’s second-largest dairy near Boardman and that his father is not involved in the project.

Cole Easterday and his brothers, Clay and Cutter, own Easterday Dairy LLC. The company formed in early 2019 after the family purchased the former Lost Valley Farm for \$66.7 million.

In a statement, Cole Easterday said his father is not in management or control of the dairy enterprise.

Easterday Dairy LLC has applied for a new Confined Animal Feeding Operation, or CAFO, permit from the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Department of Environmental Quality to operate the farm with 28,300 cattle.

“I cannot comment on the situation with Easterday Ranches, as neither my brothers or I are involved in that operation,” Cole Easterday said.

“Easterday Dairy LLC will continue to comply with our current permit, and will continue with our CAFO application. We are looking forward to the operation and

success of our dairy.”

Lost Valley Farm started in 2018 on 7,228 acres in what used to be the Boardman Tree Farm. The dairy was shut down within a year after racking up more

than 200 violations of its CAFO permit and its owner filing for bankruptcy.

The Easterdays bought the property — excluding cattle — at an auction and promised to invest millions of dollars

upgrading wastewater facilities to ensure environmental compliance.

“We will invest what we need to make the dairy operational,” Cole Easterday said.

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