



# CULTIVATING BRIGHT IDEAS



## From grape goggles to berry blockchains, **NW Ag Innovation Hub** connects growers, technologists

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
Capital Press

**S**ALEM — Bruce Sonnen came up with the idea for “wine goggles” a few years ago as a way to improve the quality of Oregon’s already world-famous Pinot noir.

The concept is simple, said Sonnen, the vineyards manager at Van Duzer Vineyards in Dallas, Ore. As Pinot noir grapes ripen, they gradually change color from green to purple to dark purple, a period in viticulture known as veraison.

But not all grapes ripen at the same pace, and unripe fruit can throw off the flavor of the finished wine (Sonnen compares the taste to Lemonhead candies). Color is the key to helping workers identify which clusters to remove before the all-important harvest and crush begin.

To help identify ripe grapes, Sonnen had an idea for tinted eyewear that can make those darker shades of purple “pop” more clearly.

“The idea with the color goggles is they could make those ripe berries stand out,” he said. “We can



**Bruce Sonnen**



Courtesy of Pete Nelson

**Allison Malone, a student at University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, runs a TerreSentia robot to monitor progress of cotton maturity. TerreSentia is a product of Earthsense, an AgLaunch portfolio company which has been field testing in Tennessee and the Mississippi Delta region since 2019.**

make sure nothing we don’t want goes into the wine.” Sonnen pitched his idea to a team of developers last year as part of a five-day Agricultural Innovation

Design Sprint Challenge, hosted by the Technology Association of Oregon.

The team designed a pair of glasses, which Sonnen said has the potential to become a low-cost tool for winegrape growers.

“You’d be able to sell them like hotcakes in our industry, for sure,” he said, adding that “it’s still a work in progress.”

Wine goggles are one example of how the newly established Northwest Ag Innovation Hub is laying the foundation for agricultural technology to flourish in the Willamette Valley, connecting farmers with tech gurus to solve problems and create new businesses along the way.

### Pipeline for startups

The Hub is led by Alex Paraskevas, rural innovation catalyst for the Strategic Economic Development Corp., or SEDCOR, based in Salem and serving Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties.

Since joining SEDCOR in 2018, Paraskevas has become something of an evangelist for the

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# Pandemic demand snarls shipping traffic

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

Transportation is critical to the U.S. dairy industry to move milk from farms to processing plants and then to ship dairy products to domestic and overseas markets.

But the pandemic has made all modes of transportation — shipping, trucking and rail — more difficult.

The U.S. economy has been speeding up due to massive government stimulus. Meanwhile, everything is slowing down on the supply side, Phil Plourd, president of Blimling and Associates, said in the latest “Blimling



**Phil Plourd**

Breakdown” webinar.

Looking at overseas transportation, shipping slowdowns, port delays, a shortage of containers and labor issues are all challenging overseas trade, he said.

On average, ships at the Port of Los Angeles are taking eight or more days to get unloaded, he said. That’s more than twice as long as normal.

“So we have major logjams at the ports,” he said.

The pandemic accelerated e-commerce, and it’s still going strong. A lot

of goods are coming from China and elsewhere overseas, and freight rates from Asia to the West Coast are high, he said.

“This puts sort of a premium on getting stuff here and getting it here as quickly as possible. It’s become more cost effective to send empty containers out of the U.S.,” he said.

It’s more cost-effective to send ships back to Asia with empty containers to bring in another load of iPhones and Pelotons (stationary bicycles) than to wait to load dairy products or other goods, he said.

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Don Jenkins/Capital Press File

**Cargo containers at the Port of Tacoma in Washington state. A shortage of containers and labor are slowing shipments.**

# Organic produce sales continue growing, sales up 9.3%

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**  
Capital Press

The pandemic has driven record sales and interest in organic food — and that momentum isn’t yet slowing.

A new report from the Organic Produce Network and Category Partners this month shows that total U.S. organic fresh produce sales for the first quarter of 2021 increased 9.3% from the same period in 2020

— nearly \$88 million additional sales.

Conventional produce dollars, in contrast, saw only a modest year-over-year increase at about 2.9% during the first quarter.

By volume sold, organic bananas, carrots and apples ranked as the top drivers at retail this first quarter, according to the report.

By dollar amount sold, the top 10 categories, from highest to lowest, were:

- Pre-packaged salads.
- Berries.
- Apples.
- Herbs and spices.
- Carrots.
- Lettuce.
- Bananas.
- Citrus.
- Tomatoes.
- Potatoes.

Packaged salads, in the No. 1 spot, accounted for 17% of all organic sales.

Sarah Brown, education and advocacy director at Oregon Tilth, a nonprofit that certifies organic producers, told the Capital Press last year that consumers turned to organic produce during the pandemic for several reasons. People were cooking more at home and appeared to be looking for a sense of security and a stable, local food source.

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