

# Hub: Small-scale ranches face challenge getting meat to market

Continued from Page 1

## Lack of infrastructure

Gardner and his wife, Hilary Foote, started ranching in Nehalem, 40 miles south of Astoria, in 2014. They raise grass-fed beef and pastured pork.

As small-scale ranchers, Gardner said they face challenges getting their meat to market. Nehalem River Ranch processes about 35 cows and 90 hogs per year. The closest cold storage space they can rent is 80 miles away in Portland — a three-hour drive round-trip.

The food hub aims to address that lack of infrastructure, providing the facilities necessary to get locally produced food from farm to plate.

“We’re trying to solve those market gaps,” Gardner said.

According to a USDA directory, there are 219 local food hubs across the country, including five in Oregon. As demand for fresh, local food increases, the role of food hubs is to help aggregate and distribute products from small-scale farms, allowing them to access markets they otherwise couldn’t reach on their own — such as restaurants and grocery stores.

Before Johnson turned to organic farming, he ran a restaurant for nearly four years in Vashon Island, Wash., called Fred’s Homegrown Cafe. His goal was to cook as much as possible with local ingredients, though he said it was difficult to find farmers who could keep pace.

Restaurants need suppliers who can reliably deliver products each week, Johnson said. That’s where traditional wholesale food distributors such as Sysco typically come in.

“I had some success getting local products on the plate, but for the most part I was just as tethered to standard purveyors as anyone,” he said.

But Johnson said he always preferred farm fresh produce. “Sysco cannot deliver a tomato like I can grow and pick right off the vine,” he explained.

Customers at Fred’s Homegrown Cafe particularly craved local eggs, and pancakes made with fresh Marionberries.

“The public is just hungry



George Plaven/Capital Press

**Corey Omey, left, of EMA Architecture, looks over blueprints for the Astoria Food Hub with Jason Stegner, the project’s general contractor, and Jared Gardner of Nehalem River Ranch.**

for this,” Johnson said. “And so, if you can offer it, they just gobble it up.”

## Nehalem Provisions

Gardner believes Oregon’s North Coast is one of the best food regions in the world.

Farmers grow a variety of cool-season crops, from leafy greens to berries. The climate is ideal for lush green pastures where cattle graze, producing meat and milk. Then, of course, there’s the seafood, delivered fresh off the fishing boats.

“You got your meats, your cheeses, your fish, your salads ... what else is there, right?” Gardner said.

Small farms dominate the agricultural scene on the North Coast. As of the latest USDA Census of Agriculture, Clatsop and Tillamook counties had a combined 519 farms, of which 212 farms — roughly 40% — sell less than \$2,500 worth of products each year.

The idea for the Astoria Food Hub started percolating

several years ago as Gardner was working to supply local beef to the Fort George Brewpub, a popular spot in the city.

Looking at the numbers, the demand was more than anybody he knew could produce by themselves, Gardner said. Rather than forming a co-op, Gardner established Nehalem Provisions in 2018, buying beef and pork from other ranchers along the North Coast to sell to Fort George.

A local food hub could provide a similar boost for farms of all types, Gardner realized.

“It really was seeing the demand from the local marketplace, the chefs that want good products and their customers, that kind of got us thinking about a physical space to have a larger cold storage, the distribution hub and more retail space,” Gardner said. “That’s where this idea was born.”

## Historic building

Gardner and his team of partners have spent the bet-

ter part of the last two years searching for a home for the food hub.

In December, they found the Mason, Ehrman & Co. building. The spacious Art Deco facility began life in the 1930s as a wholesale grocer that shipped goods along the Pacific Coast from Northern California to Alaska.

Most recently, the building was used as a Sears Home-town store before it closed last year. A few remnants of Sears shelving and inventory lie scattered on the wooden floor of the back loading dock, facing the waterfront.

The Astoria Food Hub raised \$700,000 to buy the building, returning it to its food-based roots. The sale closed on April 26.

Funding for the purchase came through Steward, an online lender specializing in agricultural projects that allows members of the community to invest in the loan and earn interest.

“We were blown away by all the support from the com-

munity for investing in this,” Gardner said.

Corey Omey, the architect behind the food hub and one of its co-owners, said the plan is to promote the building’s history, coming full circle as a local and regional food distributor.

“I think it’s a perfect historical backdrop,” said Omey, who owns EMA Architecture in Portland. “It’s really fun to bring that character and quality back into a space.”

Omey was introduced to Gardner last spring, and the two became fast friends upon realizing they had a shared vision for local food. Growing up in Western Michigan, Omey was raised in a food co-op, and said local food is part of his DNA.

“We have the same ethos,” Omey said. “When you meet someone who is so passionate about food systems, health and equity within farming, fishing and ranching ... that’s exciting. It’s fun to be part of things like that.”

As currently envisioned, the 13,500-square-foot building will have two to four office and retail spaces in the front of the building, facing Marine Drive. The back warehouse area will be reserved for a cold storage, kitchen space and later a restaurant serving local food.

The building also has a 13,500-square-foot basement that will be retrofitted in future phases of the project for additional storage and processing space.

Benjamin Ariff, owner of Straw to Gold Productions in Portland, is another partner on the project, helping to envision its interior design. He said their approach is to create a hub that’s genuinely built for everyone.

“I think it is important for us as consumers to be more in touch with the food system and pay more respect to those people,” Ariff said. “We’re going to make some steps in the right direction toward that.”

## Attracting tenants

While design and construction work gets underway, Gardner said the next step is to find tenants who in turn will become the heart and soul of the food hub.

At least one tenant is already interested in joining

the project. The North Coast Food Web, an Astoria-based nonprofit, works with approximately 40 local producers in Clatsop and Tillamook counties, providing educational programs and running a weekly farmers market.

Jessika Tantisook, the group’s executive director and a former cranberry farmer, said the market was forced to pivot to online sales this year amid the coronavirus pandemic. She started working with Gardner at Nehalem Provisions to pick up and deliver produce that was sold online, since he was already on the road.

At the food hub, Tantisook said they would have more space for their retail store to sell local food products, and a demonstration kitchen where they can teach community members about healthful eating and sustainability.

The group’s board of directors is now considering a letter of intent to join the food hub.

“I hope that, in 5 to 10 years, we see the North Coast as a great place to be a producer,” Tantisook said. “Clatsop County has a rich history of agriculture, fishing and ranching. But I think that in the last few decades, a lot of

that has gone away because there isn’t the support services for it. I hope that the food hub can be that entry point.”

Johnson, the Washington farmer, said the food hub is “absolutely” something he would be interested in joining.

“There are a lot of logistical issues going on (with small farmers),” he said. “That’s what I find fascinating with this place, because they’re actually focusing on those issues.”

If all goes according to plan and the project continues to attract investment, Gardner said the restaurant could be in operation by next spring, and the basement completed by next summer. More than 100 people have already registered their intent to invest in the next phase of the project on Steward.

“To me, it’s clear that people want healthy, good-tasting local food, and they’re willing to invest in it with their pocketbooks,” Gardner said.



Jessika Tantisook

## Klamath: Drought emergency declared in Oregon counties

Continued from Page 1

The Klamath Project Drought Response Agency has said it will focus primarily on compensating farmers for idling groundwater this year, unless significantly more funding is made available. Applications will likely be open in the first half of June, according to the agency.

On May 6 — one week before the A Canal was shut down — the KWUA, Oregon Farm Bureau and Oregon Water Resources Congress sent a letter to Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, seeking millions of dollars of additional drought aid from the state.

In part, the groups requested:

- \$6 million in funding for farmers impacted by drought, administered through Business Oregon.

- \$9 million for the Klamath Project Drought Response Agency to cover increased groundwater pumping costs, improving domestic wells and other Project maintenance work.

- \$1 million for long-term drought resiliency projects, administered through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

- \$500,000 toward establishing a cost-share program to help irrigators install flow measuring devices aimed at conserving water.

“While some amount of federal resources have been identified for the Project, those funds do not match the scope of the problem, leaving major impacts and unmet needs,” the groups stated in their letter.



U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

**The Klamath Basin.**

Charles Boyle, a spokesman for Brown, did not address these specific requests but said the governor is committed to working with Oregon’s congressional delegation, “in pursuit of all avenues of relief for the Klamath Basin.”

Brown has declared a drought emergency in Klamath County, along with seven others in Oregon including Wheeler, Morrow, Lake, Jackson, Gilliam, Douglas and Baker counties.

U.S. Reps. Doug LaMalfa, R-Calif., and Cliff Bentz, R-Ore., have also intro-

duced a \$57 million disaster aid proposal to assist the Klamath Basin. Within that package, \$40 million would go directly to agricultural producers through USDA programs.

Another \$2.5 million would go to families whose residential wells have run dry, and \$4 million to irrigation districts to repair canals damaged by the lack of water.

The proposal would allocate \$3 million in aid for commercial fishermen, and \$5 million to tribes and tribal governments in food aid through the USDA and

Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“Last week’s decision by the Bureau of Reclamation to eliminate water deliveries to farmers and wildlife is absolutely crippling to the Klamath Basin,” LaMalfa said. “The federal government has failed to properly manage the water in the basin, and Congress must take action to help prevent further damage to the area’s residents, crops and wildlife.”

Meanwhile, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Oregon and California announced \$1.8 million in funding on Tuesday for Klamath Basin drought assistance through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

NRCS funding covers a variety of practices to reduce soil erosion and health, such as no-till, reduced till, mulching, cover crops and wind barriers. Farmers can apply at their local NRCS field office. Applications are due June 16.

Ben DuVal, a Klamath Project irrigator who grows alfalfa hay and raises cattle near Tulelake, Calif., said farmers are still adapting to this year’s harsh reality.

“Plans are changing by the minute,” DuVal said. “We’re trying to get the maximum use out of a very limited supply of well water.”

DuVal, who serves as president of the KWUA, said he has been impressed with the community, watching as neighbors help neighbors to get the most out of every last drop of water.

“If there’s a bright spot in all of this, that’s got to be it,” he said. “This is a good community, full of good people.”

## Water: Shrinkage of alfalfa acreage has been dramatic

Continued from Page 1

Alfalfa, an irrigated crop, is also impacted. Over the past 10 years, as water shortages have become more common, experts say the shrinkage in alfalfa acreage has been “dramatic.”

According to USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service, California farmers in 2020 harvested just 515,000 acres of alfalfa, down from more than 1 million acres in 2010. Oregon’s alfalfa acreage also shrank during that timeframe — by nearly 14%.

“Drought has been a huge contributor to the decline in alfalfa acreage,” said Daniel Putnam, Extension agronomist and forage specialist at the University of California-Davis. “Water uncertainty, labor, and economics, I think, have driven the shift to different crops.”

Although the West exports hay, Putnam said it’s actually a “hay deficient region.” With shrinking alfalfa acreage, Putnam said he expects higher hay prices this year — good for hay growers, bad for livestock producers.

But Putnam said he thinks farmers are too quick to throw in the towel on alfalfa when drought hits. Putnam said that based on his research, he thinks alfalfa is a great crop to grow during drought.

“It’s counter-intuitive,” he said.

The secret to growing alfalfa with water shortages, he said, is partially irrigating.

Based on Putnam’s studies, when a grower cuts back to 50% of full watering, alfalfa still produces 80% to 85% of full yield. When a grower cuts to 75% of full watering, 95% of full yield is obtained.

Putnam’s advice is to water the crop as fully as possible for as long as possible, harvesting early cuttings and foregoing late cuttings.

The water shortage is also impacting almond growers.

In the best almond-growing regions, most growers are continuing as-is or even scaling up production. In contrast, some growers across drier areas are pulling out hundreds of almond acres and either planting other crops, like pistachios, or finding other uses for land, like leasing to solar facilities.

Overall, however, the almond industry continues to grow by acreage and production, according to Richard Waycott, the Almond Board’s CEO and president.

Farmers growing other crops, including vegetables and fruits, are also suffering.

Industry leaders across commodities are pushing legislators to have more conversations about groundwater recharge, stormwater and recycling of municipal wastewater.