

River: ‘It was pretty shocking to see what was proposed down there’

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Out of 886 segments, 752 are identified as “streams,” rather than rivers. Another 33 are identified as “gulches,” one “draw” and 17 were “unnamed tributaries.”

Geissler said he visited several of the streams earlier this year along the Nestucca, North Umpqua and Applegate rivers, spanning the northern Oregon coast south to the Rogue Valley.

Photos taken at Southern Oregon’s Bear Gulch in May show Geissler straddling a dry channel, virtually indistin-

guishable from the surrounding landscape.

“It was pretty shocking to see what was proposed down there,” Geissler said. “Part of it is a lack of analysis.”

Geissler’s research and observations were the basis for comments submitted by the AFRC on the River Democracy Act, which received a public hearing on June 23 in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

The bill would roughly triple the number of wild and scenic rivers across Oregon to protect fish and wildlife, water quality and

outdoor recreation values.

It also increases wild and scenic river corridors from a quarter-mile to a half-mile on both sides, which adds up to approximately 3 million acres of protected land — an area approximately the size of Connecticut.

The concern, Geissler said, is whether the designation will make it harder for land managers to do forest thinning projects designed to reduce the size and severity of wildfires.

“My assumption is these half-mile corridors will be no-touch buffers,” he said.

AFRC President Travis

Joseph said the group does not oppose the Wild and Scenic River Act, created in 1968 to preserve rivers with “outstanding natural, cultural and recreational values.” However, he said the River Democracy Act violates the spirit of the law.

Catastrophic wildfires, erosion and sedimentation pose the greatest threats to watersheds and rivers, Joseph said.

Wyden, who is spearheading work on the bill, pushed back against that notion.

The bill requires the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to establish wildfire plans and cooperative

agreements with states and local governments to allow forest thinning within riparian areas that haven’t been prioritized until now, Wyden said.

In addition, Wyden said the River Democracy Act allows ephemeral and intermittent streams to be included in the national Wild and Scenic River system.

“These are some of the most important tributaries of larger, more iconic systems like the Columbia, Willamette and Rogue rivers,” Wyden said in a statement, adding that 1.7 million Oregonians receive drinking water

from public systems that rely at least in part on intermittent, ephemeral or headwater streams.

Steve Pedery, conservation director for the environmental group Oregon Wild, said there is nothing in law that prevents an intermittent stream from qualifying for protection.

“To people who manage rivers, and are working on things like restoring salmon or protecting drinking water, they recognize that you have to start with the headwaters,” Pedery said. “You can’t just focus on the big river downstream.”

Pickle: ‘The farmers have absolutely amazed me’

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From ‘kiddie pool into deep water’

Scaling up

In the “Getting Your Recipe to Market” class, co-run by Portland Community College’s Small Business Development Center and Oregon State University’s Food Innovation Center, Walton learned about product development, food science, packaging, distribution and marketing.

“It was all new to me,” said Walton.

Sometimes, a new product begins with a startup. Other times, a food company simply adds a new product to its lineup. Occasionally, farmers take a product to market themselves.

The best way to get started, according to experts, is to “test the waters.”

“I think a great place to start out and learn is through farmers markets,” said Mike Seely, a Willamette Valley mint grower who sells value-added products such as mint patties and teas through thousands of national retail stores. “That’s where we got started. You learn what works and what doesn’t, what people like and don’t.”

Erick Garman, trade development manager at the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said as farmers and food companies scale up, it’s important to avoid common pitfalls.

Garman and his colleague, Lauren Gwin, associate director of OSU’s Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems, advise producers to:

- Do market research.
- Know each retailer’s mission.
- Get to the decision-maker as soon as possible.
- Be able to explain their product in detail.
- Understand their category and competition.
- Make sure they’re in compliance with food safety and labeling requirements.
- Have a clear sense of production costs and markups.
- Have a well-organized invoicing system.
- Be prepared to invest in new equipment and infrastructure.

Gwin advises producers to keep some of their business in direct-to-consumer and foodservice.

“It diversifies your risk,” she said.

Lynne Barra, owner of Paradigm Foodworks Inc., a food manufacturer, said she’s seen many farms and food businesses fail because they weren’t prepared.

“If you go from the kiddie pool into the deep water, you gotta have deep pockets,” she said.

In search of the perfect cucumber

The farm

With the new business started, it was pickle time.

First, Walton would need cucumbers — and a lot of them. But where to find them?

In her class, Walton asked Sarah Masoni, a leader in OSU’s Food Innovation Center, if she knew any growers. Masoni suggested Bob Egger, co-owner of Delta Farms, a division of Sauvie Island’s famous Pumpkin Patch, and Anthony Fazio, owner of Fazio Farms in Portland.

Walton met the farmers and decided to buy cucumbers from both, along with dill and other produce for pickling such as green beans.

“Word-of-mouth” recommendations are key, so industry experts recommend farmers introduce themselves to many processors, manufacturers, distributors and retailers.

Working with farms proved to be a steep learning curve for Walton.

“I learned to expect the unexpected,” she said.

Her first year, Walton ordered thousands of pounds of green beans. She was surprised to find some were wonky shapes that couldn’t fit inside pickling jars.

“I didn’t even think about green beans not being straight,” she said.

She learned in the future to order 10% extra.

Working with the farms, Walton said, was also a joy.

“The farmers have absolutely

amazed me,” she said. “They work their buns off.”

Egger, of The Pumpkin Patch, said he sells about half his produce in the farm’s own market and half wholesale. His No. 1 customer is Albertsons grocery stores.

Egger said when Walton approached him looking for a supplier, he was grateful for the opportunity. But pickle production, he said, is challenging.

A cucumber destined for the pickle market must be hand-picked at precisely the right size.

Hand picking is hard labor, said Egger. He said he pays his employees \$16 per hour “to hand harvest tiny little pickles.”

“How long can hand harvesting pickles go on?” said Egger. “People don’t realize how expensive and labor-intensive this crop is. Pickles are about the hardest thing to do wholesale.”

Where the ingredients go

The processor

Now that Walton had the ingredients, it was time to make pickles. The problem: Her kitchen couldn’t process thousands of pounds of cucumbers, nor was it licensed. She needed to find a contract packer, also known as a co-packer — a food manufacturing company.

Food startups and farmers often begin by working with co-packers, and if the startup grows into a major food brand, its owners may invest in building processing and manufacturing plants.

Typically, one more step comes before the co-packer: the processor. A processor prepares raw ingredients for manufacturing by blending, grinding, freezing, roasting, pureeing or peeling.

A co-packer then takes the processed ingredients and uses them in recipes to make products.

Between each facility, a sequence occurs: load, ship, receive. This may happen under the umbrella of one company, or each hauler and contractor may be separate.

Three Little Figs

Manufacturers and co-packers

Walton’s first co-packer was Dundee Fruit Co. in McMinnville, Ore. After harvest, about 25 Dundee Fruit Co. employees would pack Walton’s pickles — up to 3,000 jars per day.

“It was really cool,” said Walton.

When ownership changed, Walton shifted to a smaller Portland co-packer called Three Little Figs.

The company produces artisan jams, many using a fig base, under its Three Little Figs brand name, and does co-packing for other companies on the side, a common setup. Liz Cowan, the owner, worked as a fashion stylist for



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Employees package newly made marionberry jam at Paradigm Foodworks.



Jill Beaman



Bob Egger



Erick Garman

15 years before opening the company to pursue her “first love” — food.

Oregon and Washington combined have more than 100 co-packing operations, according to ODA.

“It’s a fascinating line of work,” said Lynne Barra, owner of Paradigm Foodworks Inc., a co-packer and manufacturer in Lake Oswego, Ore.

Barra, formerly a math teacher, got into the food world when dabbling with chocolate-making. She has this sign hanging in her office: “Forget love! I’d rather fall in chocolate.”

Today, about 25% of her production is proprietary and 75% is co-packing. She works directly with some farmers, but mostly buys ingredients through processing plants.

According to Jill Beaman, a Portland-based business adviser to food entrepreneurs, some co-packers source ingredients for a food company, while others expect the company to find its own ingredients.

How a co-packer gets paid also varies. Some co-packers buy a recipe or inventory outright, while others charge for services.

Stored away

The forwarding warehouse

Most co-packers don’t have sufficient warehouses or coolers. That means once a product is made, it’s out the door and on to a forwarding warehouse.

“Farmers and food companies need to have a forwarding warehouse strategy set up,” said John Henry Wells, founding director of OSU’s Food Innovation Center. “When the co-packer calls and says your product is done, that’s it. When it’s ready, it’s ready.”

The forwarding warehouse may be a third party or within a distribution center.

A little like Hollywood

The broker

This is where a broker, an optional role, is introduced.

“The broker is the agent,” said Wells of the Food Innovation Center. “It’s a little like Hollywood, the concept of a movie agent getting gigs for an actor.”

The broker’s role is to, as the name implies, broker a deal between the food company and retailer. On average, brokers take a 5% to 7% commission.

“If you’re not great at selling, you need somebody to pitch you,” said Seely, the mint grower.

Beaman, the adviser, encourages startups and farmers early on to be their own brokers. It becomes worthwhile to secure a broker when expanding into broader markets.

Seely, the mint grower, said he thinks it’s wise to have product in at least 100 stores before securing a broker because brokers aren’t cheap. One, he said, asked him for a \$4,000-per-month minimum fee.

“I politely declined,” he said.

Inside the warehouse

The distributor

Walton’s pickles were now ready for distribution. Walton had set up a relationship in advance with KeHE, a

GETTING YOUR RECIPE TO MARKET

The next “Getting Your Recipe to Market” class at Portland Community College is Sept. 28 to Dec. 14. Information: <https://bit.ly/3y2BEKv>

wholesale food distributor.

Some major retailers run their own distribution centers, while others contract with a third party. According to Garman of ODA, small and independent retailers occasionally accept delivery directly from a producer.

Across the industry, there isn’t agreement about whether a producer should first approach a distributor or retailer to pitch a product.

“It’s a chicken and the egg thing,” said Seely, the grower. “Stores don’t want you unless you have a distributor, and a distributor doesn’t want you unless you have stores. It’s tough to get started. But once you do, the ball really gets rolling.”

Beaman, the adviser, said she thinks the retailer is usually the best first point of contact.

“I think it helps if you have a retailer asking for you,” she said.

However, Beaman said, producers often jump into major distribution chains before they’re ready.

“You get flattered by a distributor or grocery store wooing you,” she said.

Gwin, of the Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems, encourages growers to focus on regional, independent grocery stores.

Experts say some national distributors are notorious for hidden fees and confounding contracts.

“You’ve got really good distributors and brokers out there that want you to succeed. And then you’ve got really bad ones,” said one farmer, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Supply chains are becoming more consolidated. Some growers now work through cooperatives and food hubs. Others have taken various supply chain roles upon themselves.

The Seely family, for example, created their own line of mint candies. They got licensed to do processing themselves, but they outsource for photography, graphic design and packaging.

Walton, the pickle maker, said she avoided distribution-related headaches by staying regional, in chains such as Market of Choice. As she has moved toward retirement — Walton is now 70 — she has scaled back and now only supplies one chain, New Seasons Markets in Portland.

Duker’s Dills go to market

The retailer

Spring 2021, Walton got the call from a New Seasons buyer asking for pickles again.

It was an easy yes. But when Walton first started in retail, she had many factors to consider. What was the competition like? Who was the target consumer? What product categories were oversaturated? What was the ideal jar size?

According to Beaman, the adviser, one of the most common mistakes producers make is choosing the wrong container. If the jar is too tall for the main shelf, it will go on the top rack, where shoppers won’t see it.

Traditionally, many chain stores have also charged “slotting fees” — a base fee a food company must pay for just the shelf space a product sits on.

One farmer who did not wish to be identified said a small chain store once asked him for \$10,000 in slotting fees. But slotting fees are disappearing in many markets.

“Slotting fees are a little bit out of vogue right now,” said Wells, of the Food Innovation Center.

After the pickles’ long journey to market, Walton had to face the final, and most important, test. Would anyone buy her pickles?

Walton ran in-store demos, retailers shared marketing responsibilities — and the product line was a hit. A decade later, Walton’s pickles have been featured in publications and reviews statewide.

“Who knew?” said Walton. “It’s been quite an experience.”

Rules: No longer any capacity limits on riding in vehicles

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employer-provided vans and buses.

The state set aside \$30 million in federal coronavirus aid to support agricultural workers, including \$16 million in direct compensation for farms under the Food Security and Farmworker Safety Program to help pay for complying with the emergency rule.

Nonetheless, the Oregon Farm Bureau petitioned in January to modify the employer housing rule, arguing it was expensive and displaced workers due to reduced housing capacity — placing them at greater risk by pushing them into unregulated environments.

An amended housing rule was adopted April 30 by Oregon OSHA.

Under the rule, farms that use air purifiers in bedrooms are granted a bit more latitude on housing density. Beds must still be spaced 6 feet apart, but that distance can be measured from the center of the bed, as opposed to the bed frame.

Without an air purifier, beds must be 6 feet apart from the frame, and rooms must provide at least 100 square feet of space per person.

The prohibition on bunk beds remains in place, unless the people are related or have previously lived together before in the same household.

Along with the housing rule, Oregon OSHA adopted a comprehensive COVID-19 workplace rule that applies to all job sites. That rule eliminated the requirement for extra portable toilets, and lowered the frequency for cleaning and sanitation.

There are also no longer any capacity limits on riding in vehicles.

While Brown’s decision to rescind most restrictions aims to fully reopen the state’s economy, Wood said the risk of contracting COVID-19 is still present, hence the need for continuing workplace restrictions.

Wood said the rules are temporary, and the agency is having “regular conversations” about how and when to phase them out entirely.

He expects the rules to remain in place most of this growing season.

Samantha Bayer, public policy counsel for the Oregon Farm Bureau, said growers are encouraged to see the state fully reopen businesses, but feel the workplace restrictions should be lifted as well.

“We want to see a full rollback of all COVID-19 regulations on June 30,” Bayer said. “That includes the housing rules.”

Sanitation requirements, in particular, should have been dropped a long time ago, Bayer said.

“The CDC has made it abundantly clear that surface contact is not, and has not, been a major transmitter of COVID-19,” she said. “At a minimum, those definitely need to go away.”