



WHO OWNS THE WEST?

Foreign investors are buying Western U.S. farmland. Who's investing and why?

By **SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN**
Capital Press

In recent decades, foreign investors have bought more than 35 million acres of U.S. farmland worth \$62 billion — about 2.7% of all privately held land nationwide, an area larger than New York state.

And foreign investors continue to buy, according to USDA.

Some American farmers view foreign investment as beneficial, expanding markets and access to capital. Others view it as a threat to national security, food system resiliency and land access.

The issue surfaced as a hot topic in Congress this summer after Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., proposed legislation to ban the Chinese government from buying U.S. farmland.

“Allowing this practice to continue would lead to the creation of a Chinese-owned agricultural monopoly and pose an immediate threat to U.S. national security and food security,” Newhouse said.

The legislation is moving through Congress.

Newhouse is right that China is a big player. According to 2018 USDA data, Chinese investment in the agricultural sector has grown tenfold in a decade.

But most of China's investments have been in the meat sector and the Midwest. Investment often takes a different shape in the West. In four Western farm states — California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho — China doesn't even make it onto the list of top 10 investors.

So, who is buying farmland in the West, and what are



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

David Millman, CEO and president of Domaine Drouhin Oregon.

their intentions?

Big players in the West are from Canada, Europe and Japan. Top investments include timber, tree fruit, winegrapes, manufacturing and processing, real estate development and renewable energy.

Tracking buyers

To uncover which countries are investing in American soil and why, the Capital Press requested a database of public records from USDA through the Freedom of Information Act.

The database is called the Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act, created in response to a law Congress passed in 1978 requiring foreign buyers to report transactions.

The database covers the years 1900 through 2019, although records are patchy prior to 1978. USDA is still

compiling the 2020 list, said Amanda Heitkamp, USDA spokeswoman.

The database tracks investments in cropland, pastureland, forestland and “other” farmland.

According to USDA staff, outside investments are on the rise. Filings show foreign holdings of American farmland increased by 141% between 2004 and 2019.

This, experts say, is a conservative estimate. That's because, although the 1978 law required foreigners to report land purchases, the requirement is not enforced.

Joe Maxwell, president and CEO of Family Farm Action, a group that advocates on behalf of small family farmers against corporate behemoths, said he believes the database, though useful, “woefully underreports” the number of foreign investments.

“It's just the tip of the iceberg,” he said. “We believe what's being reported is just a thimbleful of what's actually out there.”

The only way to accurately trace all foreign holdings, land use experts say, would be to piece together records from every county assessor's office in the nation — a mammoth project.

“It's just really difficult to track,” said Jim Johnson, land use and water planning coordinator at the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

Changing hands

Farmland, once in someone's hands, doesn't always stay there.

Although USDA reports foreigners hold an interest in

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Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

A historic barn near the Teton Mountains in Wyoming. Neighboring Teton County, Idaho, has seen huge foreign investments in farmland.

Conditions still ripe for Northwest wildfires

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

PORTLAND — A long and grueling wildfire season across the Pacific Northwest isn't over yet.

Conditions remain good for more blazes in parts of Oregon and Washington suffering from extreme drought, said Ian Rickert, regional fire management planning specialist for the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Rickert was one of eight panelists representing state and federal agencies during a virtual wildfire briefing on Aug. 25. His presen-



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The Bootleg Fire in southern Oregon burns at night.

tation emphasized how continued dry weather may contribute to a rapid spread of new fires, especially along the Cascade Range into eastern Washington and south-

ern Oregon.

“The most pronounced effect is the amplified drying we see in forested systems,” Rickert said. “It stresses the trees, which decreases

fuel moisture. They support combustion easily.”

As of Aug. 24, some 2,933 fires had burned 909,387 acres in Oregon and Washington, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. That is less than the 1.9 million acres burned at this time last year, but more than the 10-year average of 890,063 acres.

Recent wetting rains in northern Washington and northeast Oregon have helped to moderate wildfire conditions in those areas, Rickert said.

However, parts of the Cascades and southwest Oregon have not seen any measurable precipitation

for more than 70 days, increasing the probability of active fire behavior.

Several large fires continue to burn along the densely forested western slope of the Oregon Cascades, including the Bull Complex in the Mount Hood National Forest near Detroit; the Middle Fork Complex in the Willamette National Forest southeast of Eugene; and the Jack Fire in the Umpqua National Forest east of Roseburg.

“Should we get weather events that result in high winds, instability

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Draft climate plan excludes carbon sequestration

Public comment period ends Oct. 4

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

SALEM — A new program aimed at significantly curbing Oregon's greenhouse gas emissions is coming under criticism for omitting investments that could help farms and for-

ests sequester more carbon from the atmosphere.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality released draft rules for the Climate Protection Program on Aug. 5 — similar to cap-and-trade legislation thwarted twice in the state Legislature by Senate Republicans who fled the Capitol to deny a vote.

After the second walkout in 2020, Gov. Kate Brown signed an executive order requiring Oregon DEQ and

other state agencies to take action on harmful emissions, targeting a 45% reduction below 1990 levels by 2035 and 80% below 1990 levels by 2050.

Like cap and trade, the Climate Protection Program sets a limit on emissions that gradually lowers each year.

Part of the program also allows regulated utilities and fuel suppliers to buy or trade offset credits to meet their reduction goals, referred to as

“community climate investments,” or CCIs.

CCIs would pay for a variety of projects to transition Oregonians from fossil fuels to cleaner, more sustainable sources of energy, said Colin McConaha, who manages Oregon DEQ's Office of Greenhouse Gas Programs.

However, McConaha said it will

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