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# Opinion

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## Our View

# What are foreign investors doing with U.S. farmland?

For decades there have been concerns that foreign investors are buying up farmland in the United States.

That this is a hot-button issue for American producers and a strategic policy concern for politicians is understandable. Wealthy foreign buyers make it harder for domestic producers to compete for available farmland. Well-heeled investors of all types always push out smaller potential buyers. The thought of some foreign actor taking control of the domestic food supply is frightening.

There's no doubt that foreign investors are interested in snapping up American farmland. We are more concerned with what foreign investors are doing with the farmland they buy than we are that they are buying it in the first place.

Our reporting of USDA data shows that in the 40 years or so that records have been kept, foreign investors have bought more than 35 million acres of U.S. farmland worth



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.**

\$62 billion. In all, that's an area larger than the state of New York.

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

In 1978, Congress passed the Agricultural Foreign Investment Disclosure Act, which required foreign buyers to report their transactions.

Foreign buyers have purchased

1.2 million acres of Oregon farmland — roughly 7.5% of the state's farm acreage, according to the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture. The total is 1.5 million acres in Washington, and just 122,598 acres in Idaho.

The takeover of American farm production by foreigners is far from imminent. Their purchases in the last 40 years are equal to 3.9% of the farmland now in production.

Critics are convinced that the reported numbers are low, and contend without proof that much more land is being bought than is being reported. They concede that it would be impossible to quantify without combing through land records in 3,000 county courthouses across the country.

It is certain that the USDA's numbers are misleading. Some of the land in question has been sold by one foreign buyer to another, while others have divested altogether. Tracking those transactions through USDA data is difficult. Also, not all foreign

investors who have reported a purchase have a controlling interest in the land.

We agree that foreign purchases should be monitored. It would be a dangerous problem if foreign interests gain control of U.S. agriculture.

To be clear, we would prefer that U.S. farmland stay in the hands, or at least the control, of U.S. entities. But, the more pressing concern is keeping farmland productive.

Foreign investors are joining domestic companies that are interested in building alternative energy facilities or other real estate developments on farmland.

Turning cropland into windfarms, shopping malls and subdivisions is a greater danger to agriculture, and in turn the country, than a French company buying vineyards here to make wine.

Once farmland is built over, it's gone for good. No farmer, foreign or domestic, will ever farm it again.

## Our View



Raley's

**Raley's Supermarket displays "ugly" produce under the Real Good brand. Ugly produce, which is food that has cosmetic blemishes but is otherwise OK, has gained popularity lately as a means of reducing food waste.**

# Reducing food waste a worthy effort

One issue we can all agree on is that food shouldn't be wasted. Too much time, effort and money goes into growing food for it to be casually tossed into the garbage.

Farmers and ranchers have long been among the best of food recyclers. Vegetables, fruits — and even candy — are repurposed as livestock feed. Organic waste is composted or goes into anaerobic digesters to be turned into natural gas to generate electricity. Every part of a cow, pig or sheep is put to good use when it is slaughtered.

Even the grain left over from making beer are fed to cattle.

Grocery stores also offer day-old bread and other edibles to area food banks and others who feed those in need.

At the same time, it is scandalous to see the amount of food that goes into the trash at some school lunch rooms. Cartons of milk — unopened — are tossed, along with other foods that go uneaten.

Such waste hurts the students, who are missing out on nutritious meals — and taxpayers' pocketbooks.

Comes now a plan from the folks at the Washington Department of Ecology to figure out ways to reduce the amount of food that goes into the garbage. The idea is supported by the state Legislature.

In 2015, Washingtonians generated more than 1.1 million tons of food waste, according to the department's "Use Food Well Washington Plan." The plan calls for cutting that number in half by preventing people from wasting food, "rescuing" edible food to make sure it gets to the people who need it and "recovering" inedible food waste for animal feed, energy production, composting and other means.

If the food waste reduction goal is met by 2030 the

plan estimates a total annual "net financial benefit" of \$1 billion.

Some of the plan's recommendations are common sense. For example, it calls for nationally clarifying the "use by" dates on packaged foods. Many consumers are confused by those labels and toss out perfectly good food just because the date has passed.

The plan also points out that low-grade produce — known as "ugly" food — can be used by food banks and other organizations to feed those in need.

The plan also calls for the Washington Legislature to pass a state tax credit for food donations.



Amy Gillette/Oregon Food Bank

**A crew harvests potatoes that were donated to a food bank.**

Then the plan pivots away from feeding people and into feeding the state bureaucracy. It proposes a Washington Center of Sustainable Food Management. Housed in the Department of Ecology, it would have a website and work with other levels of government and the public to reduce food waste.

The plan also would spend between \$76 million and \$497

million a year on these and other efforts.

Once the bureaucracy is expanded, the planners would create what it calls "levers" and ban food waste from landfills or create incentives to stop it.

Other suggestions are more farm-to-school programs, incentives for value-added food processors, setting up community food hubs for farmers and others to use and more anaerobic digesters.

Most of this is good stuff. So good that it's already being done in many places in Washington and elsewhere.

Growers and processors long ago partnered with food banks and other organizations to help feed the hungry and prevent food waste. It's good to see the state of Washington get on board, but it needs to find less expensive ways to do it.

# Oregon legislators see bipartisan path forward on climate

As the Oregon legislature ended its 2021 session, an epic heat wave hit the Pacific Northwest, punctuating the importance of a bipartisan breakthrough for climate.

A substantial number of Oregon Republican legislators joined majority Democratic support for a carbon fee and dividend policy at the national level. Senate Joint Memorial 5, asking Congress to pass the Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act (currently HR 2307) passed the Oregon Senate in April with a majority of Republicans joining all Democratic senators.

In the House, over half of the representatives co-sponsored it, including two-thirds of Democrats and a third of Republicans. An additional 10% had already endorsed the federal act. (The bill didn't come to a vote in the Oregon House despite the clear majority support.)

The epic June 26-28 heat wave brought home how agriculture and natural resource operations are facing increasing, severe effects from climate change in the Pacific Northwest. On my farm near Oregon City the heat wave killed chickens, stressed the goats and killed some of the blueberry and raspberry crops, causing a personal "red alert." My husband and I are wondering how our farm can remain productive with continued heat waves and drought.

Our experience mirrored UN Secretary-General António Guterres' assessment of the recently released Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, calling it "a code red for humanity."

The magnitude of the challenges to agriculture and natural resources in the past year highlights the urgent need for climate solutions that protect the agricultural and natural resource industry in the Pacific Northwest. Because solutions can be slow to implement and to achieve reductions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions, quickly initiated and quick acting solutions are needed. Bi-partisan solutions are needed to bypass the partisan infighting and to allow stable solutions continued when either party is in power.

The carbon fee with border adjustment and dividend approach is simple and effective.

The gradually-increasing fee on fossil fuels is applied at the well, mine or border to provide the financial incentive to nudge the economy towards non-emitting practices with this clear and predictable market signal. The dividend evenly returns the money to all Americans as a monthly payment without growing government thereby protecting poor and middle income Americans from the increased cost. Agricultural diesel is exempt from the fee. The border adjustment keeps the fee from disadvantaging American industry in the face of international competition. And many economists and computer models see the fee being the single most important step getting us to being carbon neutral by 2050, as science says is necessary.

A strong and bipartisan majority of Oregon's legislators recognize carbon fee and dividend as a fair and needed way to solve the climate impacts on us. They join a growing, bipartisan, nationwide recognition. It's time for Congress to take note and take urgent action.

Elizabeth Graser-Lindsey is a Citizens' Climate Lobby volunteer and with her husband owns and operates a small farm in Beavercreek, Ore.

**GUEST VIEW**  
Elizabeth  
Graser-  
Lindsey

