

Solar project OK'd over Yakima Farm Bureau's protest

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee has approved a 625-acre solar project that will be built on agricultural land and was opposed by the Yakima County Farm Bureau.

Inslee, adopting the recommendation of the Energy Facilities Site Evaluation Council, has signed off on the Goose Prairie Solar project 8 miles east of Moxee.

OneEnergy Renewables of Seattle received permission to build the 80-megawatt project 11 months after applying. The council fast-tracked the application, ruling the project followed county land laws and

would not significantly harm the environment.

Two property owners leasing land to OneEnergy said the steady rental income was better than trying to farm or ranch the unirrigated land.

Yakima County Farm Bureau President Mark Herke said Dec. 23 the county chapter wrestled with the fact that the landowners supported the project. Nevertheless, the county chapter submitted lengthy comments objecting to the project.

The complaints included the amount of land that solar projects take up compared to wind turbines. The council said it was outside its scope to compare the relative impacts

of solar and wind projects.

Herke said Goose Prairie and other solar projects will grab up farmland that still has the potential to be productive.

The "solar industrial complexes" will bolster arguments that dams, including the Lower Snake River dams, are unneeded for electricity, he said.

Except for the Yakima Farm Bureau, however, the project faced virtually no opposition.

"I just think people are asleep at the switch," Herke said. "I think we're diving off into the unknown."

The siting council, made up of state officials, and counties are considering numer-

ous applications to build solar panels in Central Washington.

Developers must offset damage to shrub-steppe habitat, perhaps by buying other land in the area. Farmland is considered "degraded" habitat and does not require mitigation.

OneEnergy, founded in 2009, has developed solar projects totaling 700 megawatts, according to the council's report to Inslee, but this will be its first in Washington.

Goose Prairie project manager Blake Bjornson told the council at a presentation last spring that the demand for solar energy is primarily driven by state law. Electric utilities must supply only

renewable energy by 2045.

The Goose Prairie project will be near a Bonneville Power Administration transmission line. OneEnergy estimates construction will employ up to 300 workers. Once finished, the facility is not expected to create any full-time jobs.

A rancher leasing to OneEnergy said in a letter to the council that the land dries out in the summer and has low value for winter pasture. The solar panels will not interfere with the ranch's other operations, he wrote.

An attorney for the other landowner said the land is currently enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program,

in which the USDA pays a yearly fee to keep environmentally sensitive farmland out of production.

The rental agreement with the USDA will expire next year, and leasing the land to OneEnergy will be more profitable, according to the attorney. To offset taking up shrub-steppe land and land that was enrolled in the conservation program, OneEnergy will have to pay a fee to either the state Department of Fish and Wildlife or a third party.

The money will be used to buy land in the same area, according to the council's mitigation plan. Herke said that could take more farmland out of production.



A private equity firm is buying a majority interest in Albany, Ore.-based Coastal Farm & Ranch, which has 20 stores in the Northwest.

Coastal Farm & Ranch transitioning to new ownership group

By **GEORGE PAVLEN**
Capital Press

ALBANY, Ore. — A Los Angeles-based private equity firm is buying majority ownership of Coastal Farm & Ranch as the retailer continues to expand its footprint across the Northwest.

Coastal, which operates 20 farm retail stores in Oregon and Washington, announced the deal with Nolan Capital on Dec. 27. Terms were not released.

Buzz Wheeler, the owner of Coastal since 1990, will maintain an ownership stake and continue to serve on the board of directors. CEO Lori McKinnon will also continue in her role.

"Building Coastal Farm & Ranch into the company it is today has been one of the greatest accomplishments of my life, and I am proud of our support for Northwest communities," Wheeler said in a statement. "This decision was made with the utmost care for my family, our employees and the company's future."

Nolan Capital is a family firm managed by Peter Nolan that invests primarily in family-owned businesses "with exceptional track records," according to the announcement.

"We are transitioning Coastal from one West Coast family to another, and I am confident that the business is set up for continued success with

Lori and Nolan Capital," Wheeler said.

Coastal was founded in 1963 in Albany, Ore. Under Wheeler and McKinnon's leadership, the company grew to 20 stores with 1,100 associates.

With Wheeler nearing retirement, he sought a partner that could maintain the Coastal's momentum, success and culture. Peter Nolan brings more than 35 years of investment experience to the table. He is the former managing partner and current senior advisor of Leonard Green & Partners, a leading firm with more than \$50 billion in capital.

Larry Hayward, CEO of Del Mar Ventures in San Diego, will also join Coastal's ownership group and serve as non-executive chairman of the board. He will play a strategic role in advising the company's growth. Hayward was previously the CEO of Leslie's Poolmart and Carr-Gottstein Foods Co.

"Coastal's growth and resiliency is a testament to the team, culture and operation that Buzz has created," Nolan said.

"Lori also excels in her multi-faceted leadership role and we can trust that with her heading up operations, the company is in a strong position for continued success. With the collective knowledge, expertise and resources of our partnership, we can grow Coastal into one of the leading retail brands on the West Coast."

OSU Extension programs receive USDA grants to support food hubs, mid-tier meat businesses

Funding will help small and medium operations expand customer base, supply chains

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

CORVALLIS, Ore. — USDA has awarded grants totaling more than \$800,000 to two Oregon State University Extension small farms program projects.

The purpose of the grants is to strengthen Oregon's small- and mid-scale food businesses.

The first grant, for \$249,511, goes to OSU's Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems to support Oregon food hubs. The second, for \$591,951, goes to OSU's Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network to create a stronger mid-tier meat supply chain.

Lauren Gwin, associate director of the Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems, said in a statement Tuesday that the first grant, from USDA's Regional Food Systems Partnerships program, will equip OSU to work with eight Oregon food hubs.

A food hub, said Gwin, is a business or nonprofit that manages distribution, marketing, networking and aggregation of locally grown food. Food hubs share knowledge and tools with small- and mid-scale operations, helping those businesses, including farms, stay profitable and sustainable.

"The folks who run local food hubs are motivated to solve some of the food system's most difficult challenges," Gwin said.

Gorge Grown Food Network in Hood River is one of the hubs that will benefit from the grant.

"This project allows us the opportunity to actualize what we've been working toward for years: quality, fresh, local food for everyone," Sarah Sullivan, executive director of Gorge



North Coast Food Web

Fresh produce from North Coast Food Web, one of the food hubs a new USDA grant will support.

Grown Food Network, said in a statement.

Sydney DeLuna, Oregon food hub network coordinator, told the Capital Press the other seven food hubs OSU will support through the grant are Bohemia Food Hub in Cottage Grove, Food Roots in Tillamook, North Coast Food Web in Astoria, Klamath Farmers Online Marketplace in Klamath

Falls, Agricultural Connections in Bend, Genuine Wallowa County in northeastern Oregon and an up-and-coming food hub run by the Black Food Sovereignty Coalition.

"Exciting stuff," said DeLuna.

OSU, she said, will use the money to support the food hubs in creating shared infrastructure, both physical and social, that in

turn will serve farmers.

The second grant will go to OSU Extension's Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network, an organization that plans to use the money to offer training, business coaching and peer support to mid-tier meat businesses and farmers.

Rebecca Thistlethwaite, director of the network, said a special project called "Meat in the Middle" will build on OSU Extension's existing Western Meat School, an online course that has become popular with direct-to-consumer producers.

Meat in the Middle will provide peer support, learning tools, coaching and virtual short courses for at least 1,800 farmers, ranchers, meat processors and butchers across the U.S. The goal is to help livestock producers and meat processors to scale up and reach new markets.

Thistlethwaite expects participants to learn important financial skills, build business-to-business relationships, write marketing plans and learn to grow their businesses while staying true to their values.



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