

People & Places

Instructor helps farmers harness finances

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Farmers frequently needed help catching up on basic computer literacy during Phil LaVine's early days as an agribusiness management instructor.

More than two decades later, he's encountering a different challenge with the next crop of growers.

While they don't need assistance setting up printers or overcoming other technical hiccups, young farmers often aren't familiar with compiling and analyzing financial records.

"When I first got here, mom and dad didn't know how to turn on a computer," joked LaVine, an instructor at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Ore. "The new generation knows how to run a computer but they don't like to work in the office at all. Nobody got into farming to keep records."

Laboring over expenses in an Excel spreadsheet isn't the most enjoyable aspect of farming, but it's just as necessary as scouting for pests or tilling the soil.

"People who aren't paying attention to their records are setting themselves up for failure," LaVine said. "Treat it like it's a business. It's easy to get sucked up in the lifestyle of it, but it's tough to maintain the lifestyle if you don't maintain the business."

Chemeketa's agribusiness management program was started in 1970 to provide farmers with bookkeeping skills, rounding out the agronomic knowledge they gained from Oregon State University's Extension Service, he said.

Proficiency with financial records is crucial when farmers must deal with the bank or the accountant, but it's also key to operating their business more efficiently, he said.

'Lean' businesses

LaVine teaches farmers from the perspective of the "lean" business theory, which focuses on continu-



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Phil LaVine, an agribusiness management instructor, teaches farmers to compile and analyze their financial records at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Ore.

ously improving productivity while conserving resources.

"You try to eliminate waste and get the biggest bang for your buck," he said. "That new combine has to pay for itself. That extra ground has to get to pay for itself."

Growers who enroll in the program learn basic financial practices, such as reconciling their bank statements with their records of expenses and revenues.

With that understanding, they can then understand the strengths and weaknesses of their farm operations — and how to adjust spending and investments accordingly.

"You want to be able to manage the farm based on its successes and failures," he said.

More profit, less work

LaVine gives the example of a farmer who was able to double his profit while reducing his workload.

The problem was simple: An unproductive tract of leased land was costing more to cultivate than it was generating in revenue.

Until the farmer analyzed his records, though, he didn't realize it made sense to stop farming the parcel.

"He was losing money on

the lease," LaVine said. "He was taking good money and throwing it after bad."

There's more to wise financial decision-making than just crunching numbers.

Growers enrolled in the program are taught to set longer-term goals — envisioning where their farms should be in five or 10 years — instead of just reacting to immediate needs.

"Everything should be goal-driven," he said.

On the same page

Farms are generally family businesses, which requires that LaVine take on a role similar to that of a therapist: Helping husbands, wives, children and other family members understand the company's priorities.

LaVine gives the analogy of two donkeys tied together, each pulling toward a different pile of hay.

"If you're working against each other, it's going to be a wiggle. If you're working together, you can have both hay stacks," he said. "It's better for us to ensure everyone is working together on the same page."

Tracking trends and analyzing past expenses is especially important at a time of steep inflation for fertilizer

and other agricultural inputs.

For example, farmers who understand how much the cost of nitrogen has affected their past profits will be better able to anticipate the impact of a major hike in price.

"How can you possibly forecast if we can't see what's in the past?" LaVine said.

A solid grasp of finances enables growers to know how much they can gamble on a new crop, such as quinoa or hemp. It can also prevent unwise investments, such as overpaying for property.

"I've seen some really smart people be pretty silly with their farm business management," LaVine said. "You've got to know when to hold them and know when to fold them."

Grew up on a vineyard

Having worked at Chemeketa since 1999, LaVine is now teaching farmers whom he first met as "baby bumps."

LaVine's own experience with agriculture began in Modesto, Calif., where he grew up on a vineyard managed by his father, Paul, an extension agent.

After participating in FFA as a youth, LaVine went on to study agribusiness management at California State



Western Innovator

PHIL LAVINE

Occupation: Agribusiness management instructor at Chemeketa Community College

Hometown: Salem, Ore.

Family: Wife, Jill, and three grown children

Age: 67

Education: Bachelor's degree in agribusiness management from California State University-Fresno, in 1976. Dual master's degree in economics and agricultural economics from New Mexico State University in 1999.

University-Fresno.

He then took a job with a lender in the Farm Credit System network, which took him to Hawaii for more than 20 years.

LaVine went back to school to obtain a master's degree from New Mexico State University before joining the faculty at Chemeketa.

The diversity of Hawaiian agriculture is similar to that of Oregon agriculture — though with mostly different crops, he said.

The experience as a lender also prepared LaVine for his career as an instructor, since both jobs involve navigating complex financial situations with farmers.

Growers can be intimidated by the superficially different questions asked by various lending institutions, he said.

If they keep good records, though, the process is easier to negotiate, regardless of the lender, LaVine said. "It's been fun teaching over the years that they're all asking for the exact same information."

OSU Extension agent helped cultivate growth of county's ag

By CRAIG REED
For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — In his 21 years as the Oregon State University Extension Service horticulture agent for Douglas County, Steve Renquist has seen a major expansion of the area's agricultural industries.

Renquist was hired for the position in 2000 and since then he has helped large and small crop and orchard growers while visiting their properties, providing written information from Oregon State University scientific research and by teaching educational classes.

In those 21 years, wine-grape acreage in Douglas County has grown from 400 acres to 3,800. Hazelnut orchards expanded from 25 acres to almost 600. Blueberry acreage increased from about 75 to 800.

Renquist said there's also been growth in nursery and greenhouse production, and the Master Gardener program has increased to a membership of about 250.

"My role has been to help out in the fields with information, but also in marketing the area," Renquist said. "There's



Craig Reed/For the Capital Press

Steve Renquist, the Oregon State University Extension Service horticulture agent for Douglas County, helped the county Master Gardeners develop the Discovery Garden. The garden has several areas, including a Japanese garden.

been bumps in the growth along the way, but we've worked those out."

At age 71, Renquist has decided it's time for a younger person to advise and help crop, nursery and orchard growers in Douglas County. He retired at the end of December.

The horticulture agent said there have been many developments in agricultural programs and equipment that run off technological advances.

"A guy like me, when I was in college, we didn't even

have a computer, we wrote it down on paper," he said. "It's time to turn this over to some young person who probably has some technology in their skills that I haven't had."

Before Renquist came to Douglas County, he had earned a bachelor's degree in tree fruit science from Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo in California and then a master's degree in pest management from that same school. His first job was with the Cornell Extension Service in Wayne County, N.Y.

In the mid-1970s, he was selected to a 12-person team for an exchange program in agriculture with the Soviet Union. He spent 2½ years in that country, studying different crops and orchards on a variety of farms in different regions.

After returning to the U.S., he worked as a crop forecaster and traveled in the states and to Europe and South America to look at crops and make production estimates.

When Renquist and his wife, Cida, were ready for a more settled life, he saw the listing for the extension position in Douglas County.

"I liked what I saw out here," said Renquist of his initial thoughts about the county. "When I looked at the job description back then, this county didn't have a very significant horticulture industry. It was diverse, but production was pretty small."

Earl Jones, co-owner of Abacela Winery near Winston, Ore., said he appreciated the knowledge Renquist brought to the county.

"He has a world of experience and to bring that kind of perspective from those other countries to Douglas County was of great value," Jones

said. "Steve's greatest value was one-on-one, standing in your vineyard, trying to figure out what was going on. That's where he was extremely useful."

The horticulture agent also proved to be a valuable mentor to the county's Master Gardener program and its members. He and the gardeners developed the Discovery Garden and the Victory Garden on county-owned ground. Renquist used the Discovery Garden and its different areas of focus as a classroom with subjects such as plant identification, soil testing and pruning. There are educational signs throughout the garden.

"Without a doubt, it's the nicest Master Gardener developed garden in the state," Renquist said. "People walking through can stop, look and read, and learn something."

The Victory Garden focuses on growing vegetables. Those gardeners donated 9,000 pounds of produce to a food bank in 2021.

"I've been able to be here during a time of nice growth in the agricultural industry and in the Master Gardener program," he added. "I've thoroughly enjoyed it."

CALENDAR

Submit upcoming ag-related events on www.capitalpress.com or by email to newsroom@capitalpress.com.

SUNDAY-TUESDAY JAN. 16-18

NFU Women's Conference: Holiday Inn and Suites Nashville Downtown Convention Center. Topics will include business management, leadership, community building and more. Website: <https://nfu.org/womensconference/>

MONDAY-THURSDAY JAN. 17-20

IWUA Annual Conven-

tion: Riverside Hotel, Garden City, Idaho. Population growth and its impact of the water supply and the need for infrastructure improvements are among the topics that will be covered. Contact: 208-344-6690 Website: www.iwua.org

TUESDAY-WEDNESDAY JAN. 18-19

The VISION Conference
2022: Renaissance Phoenix Glendale Hotel and Spa, Glendale, Ariz. The conference engages leaders throughout agricultural technol-

ogy to address the dynamic recent advances in technology, systems and platforms enabling interconnected solutions from farm to retail. Website: <http://www.thevisionconference.com>

WEDNESDAY-THURSDAY JAN. 19-20

2022 Northwest Hay Expo: Three Rivers Convention Center, Kennewick, Wash. Sponsored by the Washington State Hay Growers Association, this is a one-stop information center for all things hay. Website: www.wa-hay.org

2022 Idaho Potato Conference: Idaho State University, student union building, Pocatello. The conference includes educational presentations and a trade show. Website: www.uidaho.edu

FRIDAY JAN. 21

SAIF Agri-Business Banquet: 6-9 p.m. Salem Convention Center, 200 Commercial St. SE, Salem. The SAIF Agri-Business Banquet is a celebration of the agricultural community and its impact on the mid-Willamette Valley. This rich and proud history is honored through special entertainment with a message. The speaker will

be Terry Tymchuck from the Oregon Historical Society. We will also recognize an outstanding FFA student for leadership in shaping the future of the industry. Contact: 503-581-1466 Website: <https://bit.ly/3sJIPs>

SUNDAY-WEDNESDAY JAN. 23-26

Dairy Forum 2022: J.W. Marriott Desert Springs Resort & Spa, Palm Desert, Calif. Presented by International Dairy Foods Association, the forum will feature what's new, now and next for dairy foods. Website: www.idfa.org



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