

The true cost of cattle

The elephant in the room is Oregon's 1.3 million cows

BY EMILY GREEN | STAFF WRITER

Oregon's bovine businesses are booming. Cattle, dairy and hay for livestock feed have topped Oregon's list of highest grossing agricultural commodities for six years running, taking three of the top four slots each year. For two out of the past three years, live cattle for beef was Oregon's No. 1 commodity in agriculture, the state's second largest industry.

This translates to a whopping 1.3 million cattle spread across the state among farms, ranches, feedlots and dairies, large and small.

In Western Oregon, where the pasture is lush, it takes two acres to feed a single cow. East of the Cascades, where there isn't much to nibble on, it takes vastly greater space, often on public lands and in direct competition with other wildlife that depend on scarce desert resources to survive.

Oregon is currently faced with uncertainty about its groundwater reserves and is falling far short of meeting its greenhouse gas reduction goals. At the same time, climate change is forcing the state into an era of more frequent droughts and a changing landscape. Is it wise to continue to pour limited resources into nourishing more than a million cattle?

Street Roots examined public records; visited beef and dairy producers; and spoke with industry leaders, environmental lawyers and activists, state and federal regulators, biologists and other experts, all in an effort to answer this question and take a peek behind what one ecologist calls "the bovine curtain."

While health impacts of consumption and animal welfare issues are equally important and controversial aspects of the beef and dairy industries, in this issue we aim to explore what the industries look like in our state, and how they might be affecting Oregon's economic and ecologic future.

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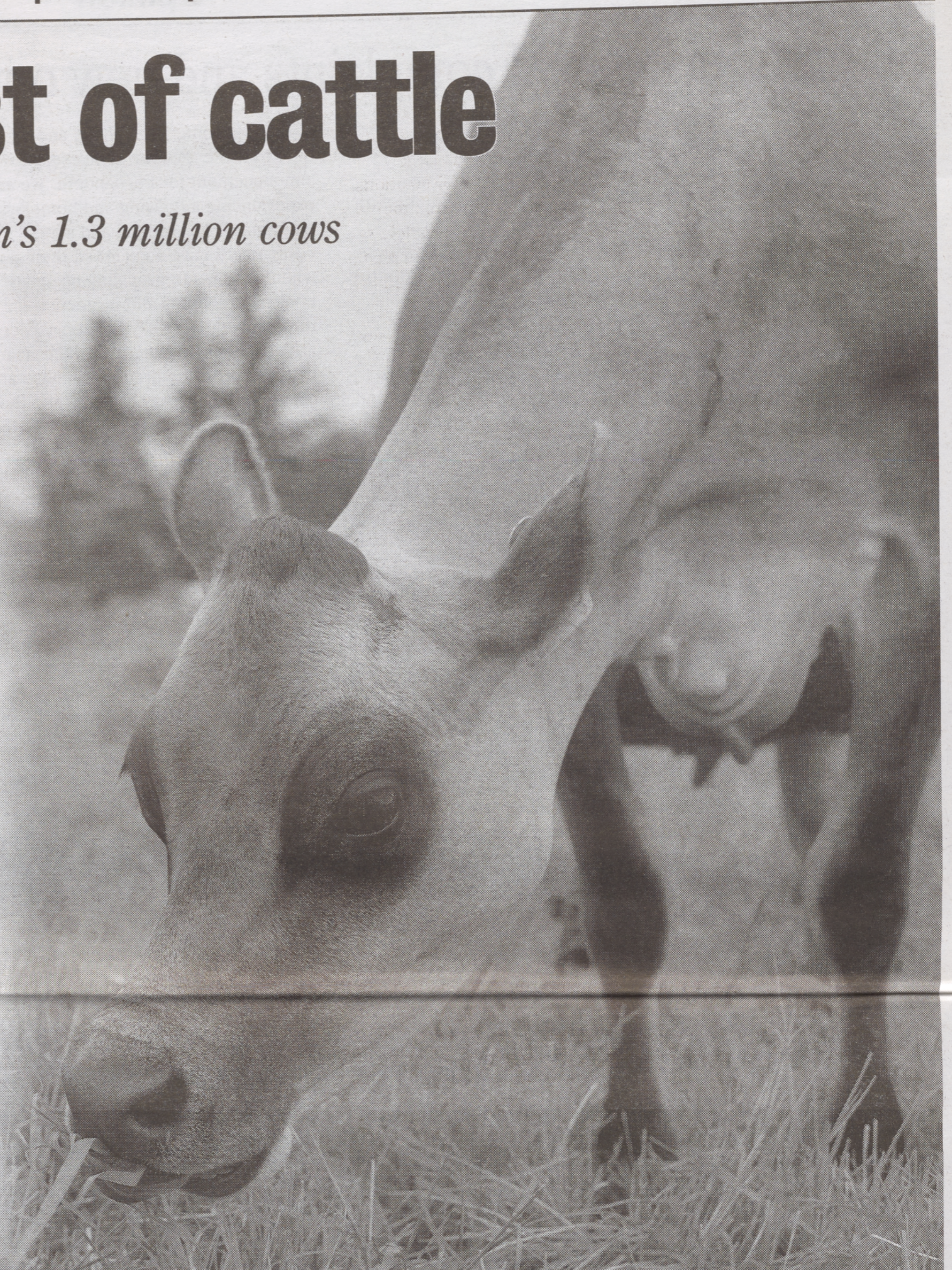


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Oregon cattle, but Midwest beef



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The first thing to understand about Oregon's beef industry is that it's quite small in comparison to its live cattle and calf industry.

"I like to tell people that the part of the beef industry that they imagine, the wide open spaces, the cows roaming free – those elements are what we have in Oregon. The other part that turns livestock into beef is typically done in other regions of our country," said Theresa Yoshioka, a trade manager at Oregon's Department of Agriculture.

The Oregon Cattlemen's Association estimates there are between 10,000 and 12,000 cattle ranchers operating throughout Oregon's 36 counties.

"Many ranchers on the west side of the state are raising just a handful of animals to feed their family and friends," said Jerome

Rosa, the association's director. "They typically have other sources of income or are retired.

"Now, on the east side of the state, it's a completely different scenario," Rosa said. "These are the folks that make their full-time living raising beef, and many of them do it in a large way."

These cows typically graze on pasture or on public lands with their mothers until they are about 500 pounds. Then they're sold to a feedlot where they are fattened up on grain, or in some cases grass-finished.

"The mother cows spend their lifetime in Oregon," Yoshioka said. "It's what we call the weeners or yearlings, the offspring, that are sold to other regions."

While Oregon has 130 feedlots, many are quite small in comparison to the giant operations in the Midwest, where many Oregon cattle are sent for fattening up and slaughter.

For regional natural meat brands, however, the cattle are raised and slaughtered in the Pacific Northwest, but it's a smaller share of the market.

Cattle ranchers are paid what an animal is worth when it's sold to a feedlot or slaughterhouse, not for the value of the end product, such as steak or hamburger, that's sold to consumers.

Today, 80 percent of the slaughter and meatpacking portion of the industry is controlled by just four multibillion-dollar corporations.

With few slaughterhouses and meatpackers located in Oregon, it hurts ranchers' bottom line.

"Their product has to go farther to get processed, and that adds cost. And not only that, but the farther those cattle have to go to get slaughtered – if they were 15 minutes away or 15 hours away – makes a big difference on the amount of shrink that occurs in those animals, and the cost to get it there," Rosa said.

Another challenge to the industry is its labor shortage. Fewer young people want to

1.3 MILLION
cattle and calves
in Oregon

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