

# GREEN EUGENE

CAN WE CREATE TRULY SUSTAINABLE  
JOBS FOR OUR KIDS?

By Alan Pittman



**E**ugene and Lane County have great potential for sustainable development — creating jobs while at the same time protecting the environment for our children, UO researchers found in a study last month.

“There already is a decent-sized and growing sustainability sector in town,” says Bob Doppelt, who led the study as director of the UO Program for Watershed and Community Health. “There’s clearly a great potential for expanding.”

Few disagree with the idea of sustainable development. “Yeah, that sounds great,” says Jack Roberts, director of the local Metro Partnership business growth group.

But the devil may be in the details. How exactly to define sustainable development, how much regulatory teeth to give it and how much priority to give it compared to traditional development efforts remains unsettled.

## LOCAL POTENTIAL

The local area already has a strong green business sector to build on. The UO study, with work by seven graduate students, compiled information from 43 companies employing up to 2,200 people with a net payroll of \$57 million.

Eugene’s pro-environment reputation, high quality of life, and strong customer base for green products has helped attract the businesses. The sustainable companies have withstood the recent economic downturn and even expanded. Unlike other industries, they have long, deep roots in the community and are unlikely to leave for cheaper labor or tax breaks, according to the UO study.

The local natural foods industry is the largest chunk of the area’s sustainability industry. The UO study gathered information on 15 natural food companies employing 334 people with a payroll of \$8.4 million. Among the larger local companies are Royal Blueberries, Emerald Valley Kitchen, Surata Soyfoods, Golden Temple, and the Springfield Creamery. The study also identified 30 local organic farms on 1,529 acres of certified organic farm land in the county.

“We have a good cluster of that” natural foods industry, says Roberts. “We want to try to encourage that.”

To expand the industry, the UO study offered a variety of recommendations including establishing a local trade association, educating consumers to buy local organics, encouraging national grocery

chains to stock local sustainable products, funding a new farmers market and low interest loans.

One idea was helping to market local organic food nationally by branding it as, for example, “Produced in Lane County, Northwest Leader of Natural Foods.” Natural foods appear to be a strong growth industry. While sales of traditional foods are flat nationally, natural food sales are expanding at more than 20 percent a year.

The UO study also examined potential growth in the local green building industry and in eco-industrial development. An education campaign for builders, public agencies and consumers on the benefits of building green, local governments leading by example with green buildings as well as strong, clear local regulations could help promote the eco-building industry. Eco-Industrial development could be expanded by promoting bio-based foods and lubricants and recruiting hydrogen fuel businesses and solar energy manufacturers, according to the UO study.

## VAGUE

While many agree on the value of sustainable development, fewer people agree on its exact definition.

In a May speech at a Portland sustainable development conference, Gov. Ted Kulongoski said, “sustainable development resonates with people of both parties, and across all regions of the state and nation. It is a vision that most everyone can — and does — agree on.”

The governor told the gathering, “my commitment to sustainability is unshakable.” But then Kulongoski went on to describe the state’s grass seed and computer chip industries as examples of sustainable development.

“Grass seed is hardly sustainable,” Doppelt says of the pesticide intensive industry. “It’s very harmful to water quality.”

The current chip industry also can be a “very damaging” industry to the environment with its huge use of toxic chemicals, water, power and lack of recycling of old computers, according to Doppelt.

Although Kulongoski has called on state government agencies to take sustainability principles to heart in their operations, he himself has taken to touring the state in a huge, fuel-guzzling motor home donated by the state’s leading anti-environmental lobbying group, Associated Oregon Industries.

“I don’t think he personally is all that focused or knowledgeable” about sustainability, Doppelt says. But Doppelt says sustainability leaders aren’t muddled about the definition of sustainable development. “They’re very clear about what they’re doing.”

Doppelt says in time, the definition of sustainability will be settled. In Europe, it already is. With the movement newer in America, Doppelt says, “We’re still stuck in the, ‘oh gee, what is it’ issue.”

The term sustainable development has been around since at least 1987, when a United Nations commission defined it as “development that meets the needs of the

present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The accepted definition focuses on reducing or eliminating pollution and re-using or recycling natural resources.

But there’s still a clear resistance among some to strictly defining sustainable development in terms of attaching labels to specific companies. Asked whether local chip-maker Hynix is a sustainable industry, Roberts of the Metro Partnership responded, “Part of what we have to be careful of is that there’s a great dividing line, and that some are sustainable and some are not.”

## GREENWASH

With the definition still vague for many, the biggest hurdle for the sustainable business movement may be corporate greenwash.

Hundreds of environmentally questionable corporations — including Exxon, Dow Chemical, Shell Oil, Weyerhaeuser and McDonald’s — have laid claim to the label of sustainability in slick advertising and reports.

The public interest group CorpWatch handed out greenwash “Academy Awards” to corporations at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa last year. “‘Sustainable Development’ is now officially meaningless,” the group complained.

“There’s going to be a lot of greenwash that goes on in this transition period [to sustainable development], the transition may