

# UNDERSTANDING OREGON

After 12 years in Washington, D.C., Alexis Taylor visits all 36 counties during first year as Oregon Department of Agriculture director

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
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The walls and shelves in Alexis Taylor's office at the Oregon Department of Agriculture are lined with framed photographs from her earlier career in Washington, D.C.

There's Taylor with retired congressman Leonard Boswell from her home state of Iowa, whom she served as legislative director for five years. There's Taylor next to Tom Vilsack, secretary of agriculture under former President Barack Obama. And there's Taylor smiling alongside the president and first lady Michelle Obama at the White House.

All together, Taylor spent 12 years in the nation's capital, including the last four years with the USDA, where she oversaw Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services — including the Farm Service Agency, Risk Management Agency and Foreign Agricultural Service.

As her political appointment came to an end in 2016, Taylor began her job search in the Midwest to be closer to her family's farm outside Holy Cross, Iowa. A friend and co-worker at the USDA then told her about a position in Oregon, leading the state Department of Agriculture in Salem. Taylor had been to Oregon once before, and was intrigued by the wide diversity of farms and ranches.

"That diversity was attractive to me," said Taylor, reflecting on her first year at ODA. "I thought it would be challenging, but it also opens a lot of exciting opportunities for agriculture in Oregon."

Despite some initial hesitation, Taylor applied and was appointed by Gov. Kate Brown in November 2016. Taylor arrived the following month for her Senate confirmation, and celebrated her one-year anniversary on Jan. 23. She replaced Pendleton native Katy Coba, who is now the director of the Oregon Department of Administrative Services and chief operating officer of the state.

At ODA, Taylor manages a department with 370 full-time employees and a most recent biennial budget of \$114.4 million for 2017-19. The USDA Farm and Foreign Agricultural Service had 14,000 employees across three agencies, with \$2 billion in annual salary and



Alexis Taylor, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture, marked her one-year anniversary on the job Jan. 23.



ODA Director Alexis Taylor with Cory Carman, of Carman Ranches, during a tour of Wallowa County.

expenses. A big part of Taylor's first year was simply learning the lay of the land, touring more than 40 farms and ranches across all 36 counties.

"I need that real-life context with farmers and ranchers, so when I'm

sitting here in my office with my staff talking about an issue, I've gotten to see the people it's impacting," she said.

Visiting every county gave Taylor a sense of Oregon's agricultural landscape, as well as how producers are adapting to remain competitive in the marketplace.

She remembers stopping at Thomas Orchards in Grant County, a tree fruit oasis on the high desert. Another stop in Klamath County revealed how farmers there started growing carrots, something they had never done before, at the request of companies struggling to source the crop from drought-stricken California.

"That willingness to try something new, to be innovative, is pretty unique here in Oregon," Taylor said. "You don't find it everywhere."

Innovation extends to new technologies, Taylor added, whether it's a dairy incorporating computerized milkers or a vineyard flying drones over blocks of wine grapes to pinpoint pest or water stress.

"It's a lot of fun to work with an industry that is so willing to look at new technologies and push those bounds,"

she said.

The interactions Taylor had during her cross-state road show helped to inform the department's new five-year strategic plan, a collaboration between staff and stakeholders that was officially announced earlier this year.

Wherever she went, Taylor said the top concern was challenges facing the next generation of farmers and ranchers. She pointed to the state Agricultural Heritage Program, approved by the 2017 Legislature, to develop grants for succession planning and easements. A 12-member commission met for the first time in February to begin writing rules for the program.

Another strategy is outlined under the ODA Strategic Plan under "Key Objective 6," promoting agriculture as an exciting career choice for students. Taylor calls this the "agriculture is cool" objective.

Citing a 2015 study by the USDA and Purdue University, Taylor said there will be enough college graduates with expertise in food, agriculture, renewable natural resources, or the environment to fill just 61 percent of jobs available in agricultural fields through 2020.

"You don't just have to farm. You don't just have to ranch," Taylor said. "You can work in logistics. You can be a journalist. You can do policymaking. We need the gamut of people."

The ODA Strategic Plan goes on to describe how ODA can work more closely with partner agencies and review its policies to ensure farmers' issues are being addressed across the state, such as water quality and availability, labor shortages and the urban-rural divide.

Ivan Maluski, policy director for Friends of Family Farmers, said his organization has tried to underscore the importance of ODA supporting small farms. While it hasn't gone perfectly — Maluski was critical of the department's approval of Lost Valley Farm, a 30,000-cow dairy in Morrow County that is now being sued by the state for wastewater violations — he said it is clear the door is open to small farm input.

"I'm hopeful there will continue to be receptiveness on things the agency can do to support small and mid-size farms and local food systems," Maluski said. "I think the signs are encouraging on the whole."

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