

Farmers:

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This general population data, however, doesn't reveal how many farmers moved.

Experts at nearly two dozen Western organizations — state departments of commerce, revenue, business and agriculture, along with nonprofits and associations — said they are not aware of any organization that tracks businesses relocating to other states.

"It's challenging because businesses are not required to notify the state if they close or move out of state," said Penny Thomas, spokesperson for the Washington State Department of Commerce.

Lynn Hamilton, professor of agribusiness at California Polytechnic University-San Luis Obispo, said rather than moving, farmers more commonly respond to pressures by consolidating, retiring early or phasing out labor-intensive crops in favor of machine-harvestable crops with higher profit margins.

Some operations, including vineyards, are especially hard to move, said Tawny Tesconi, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau.

"As farmers, we can't pick up the ground and move it," said Shannon Douglass, a Glenn County farmer and first vice president of the California Farm Bureau Federation.

Dairy and livestock producers have moved in larger numbers.

According to USDA, between 2020 to 2021, California and Washington lost dairy cows while other states, including South Dakota and Texas, gained.

Ben Laine, vice president of dairy analysis at RaboResearch, said this can be attributed to increasing efficiency, farmers moving away from high-cost states and rising consumer demand for processed dairy products including cheese; many cheese plants are in or



Crystal Otley/Contributed Photo

The Otley family, from left, Sierra, Crystal, Shane and Jacee, raise cattle and hay near the town of Burns, but now are leaving Oregon for Idaho, part of a migration of farmers leaving the West Coast.

near the Midwest.

"It's not the case that everybody's bailing out of the West Coast," Laine said. "Some are moving, but I don't want to sound the alarm. California is and will continue to be the main dairy state."

Although most farmers aren't leaving, people with a bird's eye view — experts at land-grant universities, farm groups and commodity commissions — said they have noticed an uptick in farmers moving during the past few years.

"People have talked about moving for years and years, but now people are actually doing it," said Ryan Jacobsen, manager of the Fresno County Farm Bureau. "Statistically, it's still probably a blip on the radar. But it's crazy that it's actually happening. Some people are pulling up stakes and moving out of here."

Here are some of their stories.

Smith family

Oregon to Nebraska

In early 2020, cattle ranchers Wayne and Midge Smith moved with their three kids from Oregon to Nebraska.

The Smiths had properties in Riley, near Burns, and Seneca, south of John Day.

The couple's decision to move was multifaceted, blending concerns over regulations, dwindling groundwater supplies and a desire to give their kids a better chance to farm for a living.

"In Oregon, it was an uphill battle to stay in business," said Wayne Smith, 52. "To do the best thing for our business and for our kids to have a chance and a future in agriculture, we decided to take the risk and make the move."

It took 21 semi-trucks to haul their 360 best cattle to Nebraska.

Moving also took an emotional toll as the family left relatives, friends and land behind.

"Our whole family, we miss the mountains," Smith said. "We don't have any mountains here. We can go to the highest point of our ranch, and as far as you can see, it's just rolling grass hills."

But Smith said he believes his family made a good decision.

"There's not as much of a daily wrestling match," he said.

Shay Myers

Oregon to Idaho

For some farmers,

"moving" has just meant expanding across state lines.

One example is Shay Myers, a grower in Malheur County and CEO of Owyhee Produce.

"Obviously, our farmland can't be moved. So, we've moved our packing operations," Myers said.

In the early 2000s, his business moved its asparagus-packing operation to Idaho, and in 2018, its onion packing operations. Next year, Myers plans to move the whole-peeled onion operation.

The No. 1 factor in these moves, Myers said, was the cost of labor. The minimum wage is lower in Idaho than in Oregon. Myers said that while some industries, like tech, can pass on or absorb costs, that's not an option for most farmers, who are "price-takers."

Those who stay

While some farmers leave, most remain.

"Most people aren't leaving. Most are staying," said Douglass, the farmer in Glenn County, California. "I'm glad I'm here. We do have these roots and this love for the place. And we want to stay."

Mary Anne Cooper, vice president for government affairs at the Oregon Farm Bureau, said farmers are pivoting, consolidating and planting different crops to stay in Oregon.

"It's in your blood," she said. "It's everything that you've worked your life for."

Into the unknown

For Shane and Crystal Otley of Harney County, the future is a blank slate. If their deal closes April 15, they plan to move their approximately 170 head of cattle to a state where they can expand and where their daughters, Jacee and Sierra, can "take up the reins" if they want.

"They're young. They can still change. But we want to leave that door open to them," Shane Otley said of his daughters. "Where we're going, I hope will be better for all of us."

Merkley:

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Greg Goad of Pendleton told Merkley that Pendleton was suffering from the effects of pharmacy consolidation. With Bi-Mart closing its pharmacy last year, Pendleton has only three pharmacies, and Goad said wait times for prescriptions had increased significantly since then.

"What about next year if they do it again?" he said. "If we get down to one supplier, I'm afraid that costs are going to go through the roof."

Merkley said he needed to study the issue more closely to determine why pharmacies were closing, but he added the economy was becoming too centralized among large corporations.

Briana Spencer, an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, asked Merkley what he would do to advance treaty rights and ensure the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs had long-term access to water. The Central Oregon tribes recently issued an emergency conservation order after a fire shut down its water treatment plant.

With prices remaining high after a recent surge, Umatilla Mayor Mary Dedrick asked what Merkley is doing to lower gas prices.

In the short term, Merkley said there's not too much that can be done. While the U.S. is releasing oil from its strategic reserve, it's unlikely to make a dent in prices at the pump since the market for oil is set globally. Long term, the surge in gas prices should provide the country with an impetus to transition away from fossil fuels, a move that could potentially hurt Russian president Vladimir Putin.

"If the world gets off of fossil fuels, they won't be able to make nearly so much money," he said. "Russia would never have undertaken this invasion of Ukraine if they hadn't built up a massive foreign reserve based on selling petroleum."

Merkley spent a good portion of the town hall criticizing Putin for the invasion of Ukraine and he also fielded a question from Spencer about Britney Griner, the WNBA player who was detained by Russian authorities while playing in the country and has yet to be released. Spencer wanted to know how Americans should balance drawing attention to the situation with trying to ensure her safety while she remains detained.

Merkley said drawing attention to Griner's detainment could further damage Putin's reputation, but noted the kind of man the U.S. was dealing with.

"I doubt he's inclined to be very helpful," he said.

TRCI:

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"Mr. Hanna filed for this injunction back in October of 2021 asking ODOC to just comply with the same mask order that he follows," Chavez said in a written statement after the March 21 ruling. "While waiting for this order, he caught COVID in January 2022. He and so many other prisoners have had to sit and wait for ODOC to do the right thing. It's clear and unfortunate that the federal government is the only actor to provide any oversight of the agency."

Beckerman also cited examples from other cases where DOC officials described poor or improper masking at state prisons.

Brad Cain, the former superintendent at the Snake River Correctional Institution, was deposed by Chavez on Dec. 22, 2020 as part of a separate case.

"Were you told why some staff members didn't want to wear a mask?" Chavez asked.

"I've heard people's opin-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

A sign stands at the entrance of Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla as the sun rises April 2, 2021. A federal magistrate judge in a court order Monday, March 21, 2022, required officials at the state prison to follow their mask policies.

ions on it," Cain replied. "Some people didn't believe in it. They just didn't believe in it. They felt as if it was against their rights. I had a staff member tell me it was against his religious beliefs. I've had staff tell me that it's all political and (COVID-19 is) not real."

During the course of the case, the Oregon Department of Justice revealed that around one-third of the employees at the Two Rivers prison had received medical

or religious exemptions from the vaccine mandate. Beckerman noted that employees who have vaccine exemptions must wear N95 masks at work, but the prison's COVID-19 compliance officer admitted he doesn't know who those employees are, making it "impossible for him to monitor masking compliance in any meaningful way."

Beckerman denied Hanna's request to apply her order across all of Oregon's prisons.

Ukraine:

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"Rarely did anybody who pointed a gun at us and gave us an ultimatum or fired at us before giving an ultimatum have any comprehension of our culture," she said. "You would have to know something to have a conflict with our culture. It is, historically, extremely likely that they knew nothing of our culture, but deemed that their superiority not only in power, but with divine intervention and military force, that they had the right to do what they did. It's a question that applies today. What right does Putin have to conduct his actions? Justifications matter not because it is genocidal."

Conner said she thinks Americans understand the stakes of Ukraine's sovereignty. She recalled how she recently spoke with another tribal employee who could trace her lineage to Kheron, the Ukrainian region that was recently claimed by the Russians. She hopes the lesson people take away from Ukraine and the history of

the CTUIR is a better understanding of the human condition.

"There's an artificial construct, that many of us are of a different race," she said. "There is only one race: the human race. I do not have the right to do to my neighbor what is happening there. Nor do my neighbors have the right to do it to me."

*Conditions Apply

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