

Merkley holds town hall No. 248 in Joseph

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

About two dozen locals attended U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley's town hall meeting at Joseph Charter School Aug. 12.

Casually dressed in jeans and long-sleeved shirt, the senator spoke of his latest activities in Washington, D.C., as well as answering a number of questions from the audience.

Joseph Mayor Dennis Sands introduced Merkley, who in turn introduced county commissioners Susan Roberts and Mike Hayward before getting down to business.

Merkley started by honoring the Magic Garden, a local community garden project dedicated to providing thousands of pounds of healthy foods to schools and the community. JCS agriculture teacher Toby Koehn and several JCS students received a certificate of recognition as well as a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol.

Merkley also mentioned Congress' efforts to replace the "No Child Left Behind" education program with a program called "Every Child Achieves," which will give more flexibility to states and communities to control curriculum to fit community needs.

Oregon wildfires concerned Merkley, who is working with Sen. Ron Wyden to create a policy that has the U.S. Forest Service base its wildfire fighting budget on average costs from the previous 10 years with the stipulation that overage spending in any particular year be paid from the same source of funds Federal Emergency Management Agency draws from.

Currently, the USFS borrows money earmarked for other projects, including forest health, to fill overage gaps. "It's no way to run an enterprise," Merkley said.

JCS senior and Chief Joseph Days Rodeo Court Princess, Jesse-Ellen Woodhead, raised the first audience question, asking Merkley how he planned to use Oregon's natural resources to expand rural economic growth.

Merkley answered that he is the ranking Democrat on the agriculture subcommittee of the Senate appropriations committee, and the



Steve Tool/Chieftain

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley listens to a question from an audience member during his town hall meeting at Joseph Charter School on Aug. 12. About two dozen people attended the event.

first Oregonian to sit on the committee since the days of Sen. Mark Hatfield. He added that Oregon, as a fishing, farming and timber state, has a more diverse agricultural economy than the Midwest "big farm" economy on which many government farm programs are based.

"I'm trying to inject into that conversation the types of support and agricultural resources that will support Oregon's agriculture," Merkley said.

The senator said that poor forest health has paralyzed second-growth forests. "That's good for fires and disease, but not good for ecosystems or harvesting. We need to unlock that resource." He cited area cooperatives and forest stewardships as some progress made in that area.

Merkley also addressed veteran's concerns with homelessness and the health-care, which he said are a priority.

One audience member raised the question of the high cost of American-produced medication despite the Affordable Care Act. The person noted the fact that USA-made medication

is sold in Canada for a lower price than Americans pay, but cannot be imported for Americans to buy at a lower price.

"I think it's outrageous that we invest funds in research, that there's substantial benefits in having access to the American market, but we pay the highest prices in the world. The place where it's most true is in Medicare," Merkley said.

The senator suggested Medicare be given the opportunity to negotiate drug prices just as the Veterans Administration does, or let the drugs be imported from overseas. He added that he's been on the losing side in Congress in trying to change the law.

Kathleen Ackley, executive director of Wallowa Land Trust, asked about the possibility of getting funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which is slated for expiration in September. The Wallowa Lake Moraines Partnership,

of which WLT is a part, is in line for a Forest Legacy Grant through LWCF. It could allocate enough funds to buy a significant portion of the lake's east moraine, thereby preserving it for future generations.

Merkley had nothing promising to add regarding the LWCF funding but expressed his concern that the U.S. Supreme Court's "Citizens United" decision, which allows for virtually unlimited political campaign funding by individuals or corporations, could allow oil drilling companies, which fund the LWCF by government mandate, to use their influence to stop funding the LWCF. Merkley added he was hopeful LWCF could get funding by getting attached to some key legislation.

Merkley fielded the last

Merkley isn't sold on Pacific Rim trade pact

By Steve Tool
Wallowa County Chieftain

Sen. Jeff Merkley, during his recent visit to Joseph, expressed his concerns about TPP, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement among Pacific Rim countries that seeks to lower trade barriers.

While Sen. Ron Wyden supports the pact, Merkley has reservations.

"We had an economic family that was America and other developed countries, and then we brought into that family folks like Mexico that have a very low minimum wage, which puts our workers into direct competition with workers who

often earn \$1 per hour. TPP doubles down on that with countries like Malaysia, that has a slave labor problem and with Vietnam that pays less than \$1 per hour."

Merkley said several of the included countries have no minimum wage at all. "That means manufacturing will leave and go there. If you're an investor, it's a very good deal because you can play off American workers against foreign workers, and low-income workers from Mexico against low-income workers from Malaysia and so on. If you're a worker, it's a very bad deal because it undercuts your leverage to get a share of the American Dream."

question, put by JCS Future Farmers of America member Raymond Seal who asked the senator to define his position on the Pacific Northwest Gray Wolf Management Act. Merkley replied he supported continuing funds for wolf deterrents as well as tax credits for ranchers affected by wolf depredation.

Seal further pressed the

senator, asking him if he supported the removal of wolves from the endangered species list. Merkley replied he supported the delisting of wolves from east of Hwy 395, but not west of the highway. "There's basically no wolves in that area yet, and I think they should have their fair share of the challenge," Merkley said.

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who attended the event! See you next year!

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