Hair sheep gaining popularity in U.S.

By John O'Connell
Capital Press

BANCROFT, Idaho — Brett Crump is a neophyte sheep rancher with a small herd, but he believes he's found the ideal breed to keep his operation afloat as he seeks to grow it.

Crump raises 40 hair sheep on his 80-acre ranch, also turning them loose at the nearby Chesterfield ghost town each spring to supplement his forage while providing weed control for the historic site.

Crump said hair sheep remain little known in Eastern Idaho, but they're rapidly gaining popularity among ranchers elsewhere in the U.S. due to the ease of raising them.

Crump, who sells directly to consumers, shares freezer space and the Stanger Ranch label with his neighbors to cut costs. But his greatest efficiency has come from choosing two breeds of hair sheep — Dorpers and Texas Dalls.

John O'Connell/Capital Press
Bancroft, Idaho, rancher Brett Crump walks through the pasture with his hair sheep, which are gaining popularity because they don't require shearing.

Hair sheep, like the wild ancestors of modern wool sheep, have course hair that they shed — an attractive feature nowadays, with wool prices so low fleece sales often generate less than the labor costs of sheering.

Crump said hair sheep are well adapted to the heat of his high-desert environment, one of the reasons they're gaining traction in hot regions such as the Southwest and Midwest. They're also hardy, require little attention while lambing and can reproduce twice within 14 months.

Best of all, Crump insists their meat has a milder flavor that his customers love, though they don't grow as big as most wool sheep.

"People are hesitant until they try it, and once they try it, they're sold," said Crump, who bought his first hair sheep from a Rexburg rancher five years ago. "It's new to this area, and as with all things new, it just takes time."

In 2013 and 2014 the hair sheep breeds Katahdin and Dorper both ranked within the top three breeds for numbers of registered animals, According to a 2011 USDA survey, 20 percent of sheep operations in the 22 top sheep producing states had some hair sheep, which averaged 11 percent of their herds.

Katahdin Hair Sheep International, which has 1,100 paid members, had its annual meeting in Cookeville, Tenn., Aug. 4-5. Jim Morgan, the organization's operations manager from Fayetteville, Ark., said hair sheep have experienced rapid growth in the Southwest, especially among ranches with fewer than 30 acres, where raising cattle wouldn't be efficient.

"Almost all hair sheep would be considered an easy-care animal," Morgan said.

Hair sheep growth has been especially pronounced in Texas, where producers have begun re-entering the industry after exiting a few years ago, when sheering costs began to exceed wool revenue.

"Everybody going back into the sheep industry is going to hair sheep," said Randy McCrea, a Sterling City, Texas, hair sheep rancher and president of the North American Hair Sheep Association. "I'd never go back to wool sheep."

Insider: Culture, mismanagement doomed Cover Oregon

By Nick Budnick
Capital Bureau

Take a week off, wade through thousands of pages of court filings in Oregon's long-running court battle with software giant Oracle, and you still won't have the real story of how Cover Oregon failed and wasted more than $300 million, according to Tom Walsh, a longtime technology specialist and veteran of the project.

Hundreds of thousands if not millions of words have been written about Cover Oregon in the two years since the state project to enroll Oregonians in ObamaCare imploded. However, an insider's account has never been published until now. Other top consultants and former managers have routinely declined to comment, often citing the pending litigation.

But Walsh is ready to speak out because of continued public confusion around Cover Oregon.

"I think people should understand why it failed," Walsh says matter-of-factly, given how many people worked so hard on the ambitious project, and how much was spent.

He'd also like to prevent another debacle when the state launches its next big-ticket, taxpayer-funded IT projects.

"I don't think Oregon knows that it (has) a problem," Walsh says.

Hint: it has to do with management.

Both sides in the ongoing litigation have struggled to explain the massive scope of the Cover Oregon failure, which came despite a lengthy head start and extra funding from the federal government.

The reality, according to Walsh? Compared to other large projects, "It should have been easy."

One of the roving breed of professional consultants who bounce from state to state for months or years at a time, Walsh is typically the top-dog "systems analyst" who either leads or troubleshoots large IT project design or is paid to watchdog those who do, says Shari Benkiel, a longtime IT consultant who has worked with Walsh on seven large projects in five states.

"He is usually the first person I call" to fill that role, she says. "I call him 'The Borderline Genius,' " she adds, because of his insights into complex health care technology projects.

With a Ph.D. in economics, and a resume that includes IT expertise as well as a stint as head of Medicaid for the state of Illinois, Walsh brings a level of technical, financial and management expertise that normally requires three or four hires to match, says Louisa Moore, who has worked on large technology projects with Walsh, including in California. "He's a true professional and he really knows his stuff."

'That's not going to work'

Walsh heard about it from a friend. The Cover Oregon project would be a one-stop health coverage shopping site that would allow consumers to compare health plans, qualify for lucrative tax credits and enroll in a single sitting. The federal government was supplying Oregon with tens of millions in extra funding to serve as a model for other states.

Excited by the vision, Walsh applied and went to work on it in April 2012 as a consultant.

The warning signs were immediately apparent, Walsh says. He moved into a cubicle with the state's IT team, in a Salem office building.

Rather than sitting among the workers, top management was rarely to be seen — which Walsh characterizes as "very

Jamie Valdez/Pamplin Media Group
Tom Walsh, a veteran IT troubleshooter who worked on the inside of the Cover Oregon project, says the full story of the debacle has never been told.

abnormal ... There were a lot of disputes about how we should be doing things that nobody stepped in and took charge of."

The project's top managers employed a mishmash of project development techniques, adopting multiple methods over time, but never instituting the training or changes needed to make them work, he says.

Walsh came to realize the dysfunction was mirrored on the Oracle side, where workers for the state's chief contractor were divided into fiefdoms reporting to different managers. In fact, Walsh's Oracle counterparts sometimes warned him to be skeptical of the company's work in other parts of the project, he says.

His job was to oversee how the project tracked financial transactions, such as payments to insurance agents for helping consumers.

But he and his Oracle counterparts were repeatedly rebuffed in 2012 when they sought information from other parts of Oracle that they considered crucial to the project's success, such as how massive quantities of data would fit together under the project's design, he says.

The data design would

be ready in two weeks, they heard over and over.

Walsh began to have his doubts. "You tell yourself, 'They can't be that bad ... I'm sure they've got something.' "

After a while, Walsh pursued a separate data design for his portion of the project to ensure his team was not held up. He credits that decision for his team's success, as the financial side of Cover Oregon worked fine and was completed on time.

In contrast, Walsh still recalls the shock his team felt in July 2013 upon seeing the design for how enrollment would work for the project. A colleague's muttered reaction: "Well, that's not going to work."

Fatal flaw in design?

Walsh says it appeared that Oracle managers felt they didn't need to do a ground-up design, that they were just modifying existing off-the-shelf Oracle software.

Walsh was surprised to hear from Oracle in fall 2012 that the health insurance system its staff envisioned had no capacity to process mid-year changes in a family's health policy, premiums or tax credits after they enrolled.

Such changes — due to a birth, death, divorce or a wage-earner losing their job — are common, and on multiple occasions Walsh urged Oracle to accommodate changes in its design. The response? We'll get to it later.

Not until September 2013, the month before the project was supposed to go live, did Walsh and his team learn that Oracle's design for the health insurance project still did not allow changes to a family's policy or circumstances. This meant Cover Oregon would not be able to share data effectively with the insurance carriers it worked with — a basic problem that caused ripple effects throughout the project's workings.

This, Walsh believes, was the "fatal flaw" of Cover Oregon, and why the exchange had to be scrapped. Fixing the problem would require major changes at great cost. And the project's budget was already largely expended by the time the problem became clear.

Walsh's diagnosis mirrors congressional testimony given by Alex Pettit, the state's top IT manager, who was brought in to try and rescue the project in early 2014, only to realize it was impossible due to the "fundamental design error" concerning mid-year changes in a family's policy or circumstance.
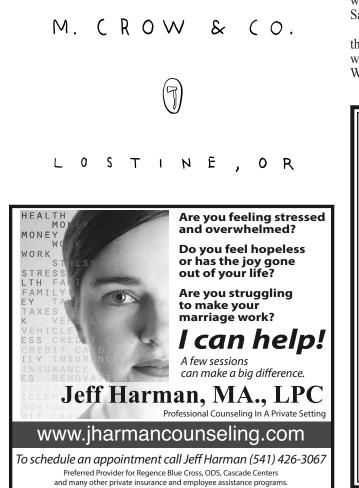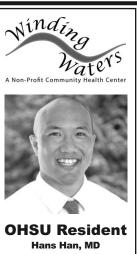
"The whole thing was going to have to be rewritten ... It was truly unbelievable that it would ever be designed that way," Pettit told congressional investigators, adding that when he complained to Oracle about its design, the response was, "Well, it wasn't in the specification."

Pettit's retort: "Well, it didn't need to be in the specification. You knew you had to keep track of changes to records, and the system wouldn't keep track of it."

Walsh echoes Pettit, that because the project's programming was in Oracle's hands, the technical design was arguably the company's responsibility.

Defects in state IT culture

But Walsh says the state bears responsibility for other problems, including delays and wasteful spending.

For instance, the state spent months and millions of dollars trying to perfect a new type of interface to shift data between two components of the project. Walsh urged the use of a standard Oracle product instead. In the end, when an Oracle analyst confirmed to Cover Oregon managers that Walsh's idea would work, a top official asked how long it would take to set up the solution.

"What time is it?" responded the analyst, and the fix was set up later that day, Walsh recalls.