

CHICKS

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It’s successful in many ways but not necessarily financially, they contend. The Hawkins Sisters Ranch is a snapshot of the real cost of raising quality meat. It is one of two Oregon Department of Agriculture small poultry licensed processing facilities in Eastern Oregon, taking advantage of new rules that allow small-enterprise farms that process 20,000 or fewer birds per year to meet sanitary and other rules without having to be USDA inspected. The chickens can only be marketed in Oregon.

Their facility is housed in a new 13x40-foot “Old Hickory Shed” that has been fitted to meet state sanitation requirements. They’re serious about sanitation. Mary will not even touch a turkey chick if she’s been working with chickens or vice versa. The interior of the facility is spotless, even in the midst of processing birds.

The operation is on their father Merel Hawkins’ 300-acre farm on Bear Creek Road in Wallowa. Merel is retired, and most of the land is leased for cattle grazing, so the sisters are getting the use of the little space required for the chicken business free.

In this facility, on this land, the sisters will butcher approximately 6,000 chickens over the next six months.

Other families who bring in birds from their own flocks for processing will have raised 60 percent of those birds. The sisters charge approximately \$5 per bird for processing. They sell their own birds for \$5 per pound, predominantly to Wallowa County customers who have spoken for them well in advance. Approximately 400 birds are sold to Portland customers through Carman Ranch Direct.

Yet, even with no mortgage and selling chicken at \$5

RIGHT Although the Hawkins sisters’ chickens are not technically “free range,” they are certainly outdoor birds with a grassy run. The Hawkins sisters also feed locally sourced nonGMO organic feed of their own blend. **BELOW** These turkeys, just a few days old, will grow up to be much sought-after Thanksgiving dinner.

Kathleen Ellyn/Chieftain



per pound, raising chickens humanely on naturally sourced custom-designed feed doesn’t pencil out.

“On paper it’s ‘Ah, I shouldn’t be doing this.’” Mary said. “The correct choice, on paper, is ‘do not do this.’”

Mary took a business course a few years ago that required rigorous number-crunching and proved that financial reality.

And yet the Hawkins Sisters are still in the chicken business. Their employees earn wages.

“I’ve analyzed, and I think it’s just me being stubborn,” Mary said. “I think: ‘surely there’s a way to raise chickens on a small scale!’ I think I do it because it’s a puzzle (how to make it pay).”

And it’s hard to quit when you’re successful on so many other levels.

“It’s an amazing product that people really want, and there’s a huge demand,” Mary said. “Flavor and texture are wonderful, people remark on it all the time.”

They’ve already met and



bested many challenges. First challenge, growing a healthy bird. The Cornish cross bird is the most economical to grow because it has been developed to grow fast and huge.

Other chicken breeds may take up to six months to reach butcher weight and years to reach maturity – the factory-fed Cornish cross can weigh as much as 10 pounds live weight in 56 days and yield a six pound roaster.

Feeding a fast-growing chicken up to that weight that quickly can lead to a high mor-

tality rate. Birds can die of heart failure, leg deformities from too much weight to leg strength, infections from lying down full-time. The butchered bird can have an enlarged heart and a flaccid pale liver that must be discarded.

The Hawkins Sisters have solved these problems through their growing and feeding philosophy. They feed their own custom blend with no corn or soy, and they don’t confine and overfeed to make what Mary calls a “Frankenstein Bird.”

Their chickens are vigorous,

docile and seem happy. The sisters reckon the average weight of their eight- to 10-week old bird, when processed, is about four pounds.

Right now, the third week of June, there are 325 new arrivals in the Hawkins brooder barn. The chick brooder space is a large, clean and roomy shed with both fresh air and six warming lamps. The sisters will order a new batch of chicks every four weeks through September.

A few hundred feet away in the hay pasture are the “out-

door” growing houses; home-made arched chicken structures that allow the growing birds plenty of protected space but provide freedom to come and go into the attached grassy yard. Although not free range, they have access to grass and bugs and are fed the Hawkins locally grown custom blend feed.

The operation will go dormant by Thanksgiving. The turkeys, a new endeavor, are expected to yield a few dollars over the financial break-even point.

NEXT?

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Rohla said Monday she wasn’t sure the foundation would be able to take on that responsibility. It is a federally registered nonprofit.

“It probably couldn’t be done only with volunteers,” Rohla said.

Generally, Wallowa County officials are supportive of continuing the grants under the auspices of another entity. Talks have been ongoing to find homes for the grants with Building Healthy Families and others.

Wallowa County’s experience is similar to Josephine County, which floated the idea to create a library district in 2014. When it failed, a nonprofit was created to help fund and promote the libraries.

The measure was reshaped and appeared on the ballot again in 2017 and was approved. It was combined with a proposal to fund an adult jail and juvenile detention facility. The package won narrow approval at 93 cents per \$1,000 of property value.

The original defeat of the issue there meant supporters had to get creative.

“The theory was that if

With the defeat of the library district measure comes the opportunity to go back to the drawing board.... We must put aside our differences and collaborate to build the future of Wallowa County Libraries.”

— Angela Bombaci
coordinator for the “Yes for Wallowa County Libraries” committee

everyone who voted ‘yes’ for the district donated what they would’ve paid in taxes, we’d be able to fund our library,” said Kate Lasky, who has been involved in the issue from the beginning. “We operated our library as a private nonprofit with a value for transparency, accountability and frugality to honor donor contributions in the same way a government agency would honor taxpayer contributions.

“Our libraries were never able to open enough hours or have enough funds to have a healthy book and materials budget, but we were open and that’s all that mattered.”

The nonprofit had a small paid staff that worked to coordinate the efforts of volunteers, Lasky noted.

The funding burden for a nonprofit in Wallowa County

would likely be less considering the three largest cities already fund a core library service.

In addition to talking strategy Wednesday, the foundation will also cast for new board members. Rohla said anyone interested should come early to discuss the possibilities.

The foundation’s charter requires that all areas of the county be represented on the foundation board.

Current members in addition to Rohla include Autumn Wilburn, Mike Crawford, Maggie Holcomb, Kay Sawin, Bonnie Marks and Lorien James. One position remains vacant.

Most of the past year has been dedicated to getting the library district qualified for the May ballot.

A separate fundraising committee operates in consultation

with the foundation board.

“With the defeat of the library district measure comes the opportunity to go back to the drawing board,” said Angela Bombaci, volunteer coordinator for the “Yes for Wallowa County Libraries” committee, which functioned independent of the foundation.

She issued an invitation to anyone who voted against the district to attend Wednesday’s meeting.

“We’d love their input,” she said. “We must put aside our differences and collaborate to build the future of Wallowa County Libraries.”

IN BRIEF

Legislators plan summit July 10

Sen. Bill Hansell and Rep. Greg Barreto will host a discussion with elected officials from Umatilla, Union and Wallowa Counties to discuss potential legislation for the upcoming 2019 Legislative Session.

The event is 1 p.m. Tuesday, July 10, at Eastern Oregon University Huber Auditorium (Badgley Hall, Room 102) in La Grande.

Legislators do not have a bill limit for the 2019 Legislative Session and as such, both say they wish to introduce any legislation to address issues or problems facing Eastern Oregon.

Elected officials are asked to bring any issues facing their city or county to the meeting.

In addition to the Wallowa County Commission and commissioner-elect, District Attorneys and Sheriffs, County Clerks, Treasurers, Surveyors and Assessors have been invited.

Mayors and City Council members from Enterprise, Joseph, Lostine and Wallowa are also expected to attend.

WALLOWA COUNTY

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Coffee & Snacks at 8am. Lunch provided.

WHAT: Begin to understand the benefits of a trauma informed system Learn next steps for implementation of trauma informed care in our community

WHO: All professional staff and community members from education, health-care, housing, child welfare, early childhood, judicial, law enforcement, systems of care, community and mental health services as well as individuals with lived experience, youth, and family advocates.

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EVENTBRITE OR CALL
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David Mildrexler, PhD
Systems Ecologist, Wallowology

Forest ecosystems play a vital role in the biosphere, but rapid environmental change, particularly climate and land use changes threaten to undermine the many valuable ecosystem services that forests provide. David’s research examines the ecology and biophysical properties of Earth’s forests, their sensitivity to climate change, natural disturbances, and forest management, and what people are doing around the world to help forest ecosystems gain resiliency in the face of an uncertain future.

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