

Future: A snapshot of issues facing the county's natural resource-based economy

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In the Hancock model the forest is divided into parcels of the best and the least profitable timber stands and those parcels are bundled into funds for investors. The idea of the bundling of parcels is to equalize the risk across 11 different funds, Howard explained.

Management of the funds is then based on the best possible return for the investor.

As a result, said Howard, companies using the TIMO model have often harvested much faster than forests can replenish, and have managed a patchwork of parcels rather than the forest as a whole.

"What they're planting is a lot more valuable than what they're cutting, but in Wallowa County it takes 50 to 70 years to grow marketable timber," Howard said. "So we're running into a pretty significant stop. The last number I heard was in five years we'll see a significant change. Having a 15-year stop would really cripple this economy. This would take away thousands of jobs in a place where there are only thousands of jobs."

Furthermore, timber companies may only be able to sell off these smaller portions of harvested timberland as recreational property. New buyers of these patchwork pieces may close the property to recreation, know nothing about management, could allow noxious weeds to grow and spread, and may make decisions that damage the ecosystem of a much larger area than they own.

"We're kind of at a tipping point where something needs to happen," said Howard.

One potential solution to eliminating out-of-state management and management models that do not take the forest ecosystem as a whole into account is for a county to purchase the land and manage it as a whole and for the benefit of local people.

Some counties are looking at the U.S. Forest Service Community Forest Pro-



Caleb Howard is a rancher and real estate professional from Wallowa County.

Courtesy photo

gram. The program pays up to 50 percent of the project costs but requires a 50 percent match. Counties would have to seek their match funds by applying to the Land and Water Conservation Fund, through log supply agreements, timber deeds and other means.

The end of the harvest

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 42 percent of the U.S. population lived on farms in 1900. By 1990, that number had dwindled to less than 2 percent.

In Wallowa County, the majority of farms are locally owned by families who work and live on the land.

Clearly, given the shocking decline in family farms, there are plenty of challenges to making a living on a small holding. But before one can even get to the challenge of making a living, they must have land.

Unless a young farmer inherits land, many find they cannot afford to purchase sufficient property to make a reasonable go at farming or ranching.

Ideally the land amassed through several generations of farming and ranch-

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Caleb Howard, a fifth generation Wallowa County rancher

ing would be passed down to a son or daughter interested in continuing the family tradition.

But the problem is that the retiring generation may have no succession plan or may want to be fair to their children and divide the property equally among them.

Parents may have hoped that one of the children would take over management of the farm or ranch on behalf of the family, but that is very often a recipe for disaster, Howard said. Everyone has an idea of how the farm should be run.

"It tends to turn into dysfunctional management and is sometimes too dysfunctional to sell," Howard said. "Keeping it in the family with everyone getting their fair share just isn't sustainable."

Often the inheriting children understand perfectly that the farm or ranch can't support multiple owners so the land is immediately divided and sold — and often permanently lost as agricultural land.

Exclusive Farm Use zoning may limit the division of the land, but most farms are the result of the purchase of parcels over generations, so division is usually possible.

One of the ways a multiple-family member ownership can work is by using a third party manager, Howard said. It's a model he has seen work effectively.

However, he continues to see farms that started with three owners become ranches owned by eight owners, multiplying the difficulties.

As the number of owners grows, they see smaller and smaller year-end checks. When an owner sees a year-end check for \$5,000 from a \$5 million dollar ranch it doesn't make them happy, Howard said.

The good news and the bad news

"Wallowa County has great water rights, great soil, but a horrible growing sea-

son," Howard said. "That is one of the best things and worst things for our area."

It's good because Wallowa County farms cannot provide the high return that investors want to see, and so Wallowa County farms have so far mostly remained smaller and locally owned.

Outside of Wallowa County, farm land may be picked up by investors looking for a recession-proof investment.

But will Wallowa County's family farms survive succession?

"Chopping up farm ground makes it much harder for young farmers to get going," Howard said. "What you see is young farmers can only get a 40-acre piece here and a 40-acre piece 30 miles away. While they're getting established they have to heavily subsidize their business."

The solution for new farmers remains elusive.

Where have all the cowboys gone?

In Wallowa County, successful ranching operations are spread across the varied landscape. Some land is owned, some leased and some available through grazing permits. This is necessary to maximize the feed available on the unique landscape of the county.

The private portions of these lands face the same dangers that farmland faces

— loss of use and fragmentation. Outside investors with deep pockets may pick up larger ranches and preserve the land, but they may also close those areas to hunting and recreation, or end ranching on the land to create a private park.

One successful transfer of lands has developed as the Nature Conservancy built their 51-square mile Zumwalt Prairie holdings in Wallowa County. Howard, whose family grazes cattle on the prairie, considers the work done by the Nature Conservancy to be beneficial to agriculture in the long term.

"The Nature Conservancy believes that to keep a landscape healthy it needs to keep working," Howard said. "They have also developed neat partnerships with other agencies and landowners to prevent fragmentation of the land."

Conservation easements are also a good tool to prevent fragmentation, Howard said, but they may be difficult to arrange.

"The problem is that most aren't bought, they are donated," he said. "There are programs to help purchase easements but agencies have to get donations or raise money through various program such as the Ag Lands Easement Program through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service."

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ATHLETE OF THE WEEK

Sabrina Albee

This week's athlete of the week is Joseph Charter School sophomore basketball player, Sabrina Albee. During the Eagles' lopsided 65-23 victory over Dufur, Albee led the squad with 25 points.

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WALLOWA COUNTY
Alcoholics Anonymous Meetings

ENTERPRISE

MONDAYS
7 p.m. Enterprise Group
113.5 E Main St.

TUESDAYS
12-1 p.m. Enterprise Group
113.5 E Main St.

WEDNESDAYS
7-8 p.m. Enterprise Group (Big Bk Study)
113.5 E Main St.

WEDNESDAYS
7 p.m. Enterprise Group
113.5 E Main St.

THURSDAYS
12-1 p.m. Enterprise Group
113.5 E Main St.

7 p.m. All Saints (Mens Mtg)
113.5 E Main St.

FRIDAYS
7 p.m. Enterprise Group
113.5 E Main St.

SATURDAYS
7 p.m. Enterprise Group
113.5 E Main St.

JOSEPH

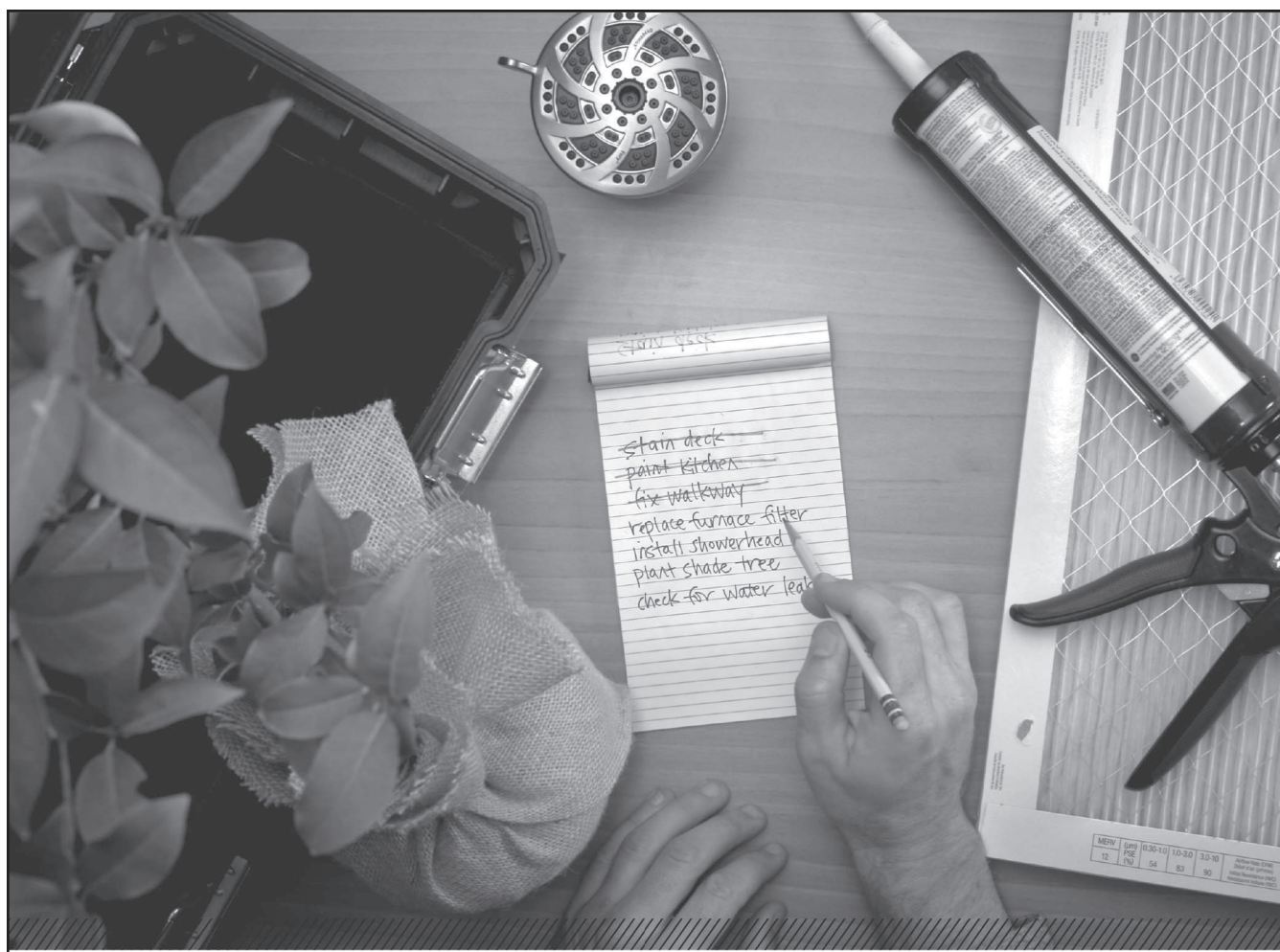
MONDAYS
6 p.m. Grace and Dignity (Womans Mtg) Joseph United Methodist Church
301 S. Lake St., Church Basement

WEDNESDAYS
12 p.m. Grace and Dignity (Womans Mtg)
301 S. Lake St., Church Basement

Al-Anon Family Group (support for family and friends of alcoholics) meets Tuesday evenings at the Joseph United Methodist Church (basement on north), 6pm-7pm.

WALLOWA

SUNDAYS
7 p.m. Wallowa Assembly of God Church
205 S Alder St.



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