

# Bentz backs passage of Farm Workforce Modernization Act

The Observer

WASHINGTON — Oregon U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz announced he voted in favor of House of Representatives bill 1603 — the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021, which passed the House with bipartisan support 247-174. The bill goes to the U.S. Senate for consideration.

Bentz and 29 House Republicans voted in favor of the legislation, which seeks to address the labor shortage many food and fiber producers face in Oregon's Second Congressional District.

"As one who was raised on a cattle ranch in Harney

County, I know firsthand just how much work must be done by those who work in agriculture," Bentz said in a press release. "I have also spoken with local leaders across our district — including farmers, ranchers, orchardists and producers; business owners; trade associations; and local governments. After many conversations and careful consideration, I agreed with my constituents that our district would benefit from the reforms this bill makes to the H-2A guest worker program."

Bentz said the reforms



Bentz

are important to ensure a stable and legal workforce is available to operate and raise the more than 200 crops produced in Oregon. The bill also

will help guard against future illegal immigration through a mandatory, nationwide E-Verify system for all agriculture employment.

The agriculture sector has long sought the reforms the bipartisan bill provides to help streamline and reduce costs in the H-2A visa program.

The program has received criticism for

being cumbersome, inefficient and slow. Still, many in the agriculture sector rely on H-2A visas to help fill gaps in their workforce, grow our economy and feed the nation, according to Bentz.

This legislation also would institute a mandatory E-Verify system for all agricultural employment — serving as a last necessary part of ensuring a legal workforce for the agriculture sector.

Bentz also reported several Pacific Northwest agriculture leaders applauded his support of the bill, which now is in the Senate Judiciary Committee.



Capital Press, File

Greg Taylor, president of Liberty Orchards of Cashmere, Washington, has announced the closure of the company, which makes Aplets & Cotlets fruit candies.

## Maker of Aplets & Cotlets candy to close after 101 years

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN  
Capital Press

CASHMERE, Wash. — After more than 100 years in business, Liberty Orchards Co., the Washington state maker of Aplets & Cotlets fruit candies, has announced it will permanently close June 1.

Company president Greg Taylor, 72, grandson of Liberty Orchards co-founder Armen Tertsgian, said the family business has been seeking a buyer for several years with no luck. Taylor, who's run the company 43 years, said he's "very, very ready" to retire and the younger generations of the family are not interested in keeping the operation going.

"It's bittersweet, but definitely more sweet than bitter. Obviously, we're disappointed it can't continue, but it's time for us all to move on," Taylor told the Capital Press Friday. "We're so appreciative of all those who have supported our company."

Liberty Orchards will continue to seek a buyer for its assets.

Through the decades, the company has bought ingredients — concentrates, purees and freeze-dried fruit — from processors worldwide. Apple concentrates were mainly sourced from Washington state apples.

The company's closure will impact around 55 full-time employees.

"We're proud to have provided employment for thousands of families over the past more than 100 years," said Taylor.

The closure will mean people can no longer buy Aplets & Cotlets candies after this June.

When the company released news of its impending closure, the community of Cashmere, Wash., near Wenatchee, was shaken.

"Liberty Orchards is part of Cashmere's identity," Cashmere's mayor, Jim Fletcher, told Eater Seattle, a food publication. In a statement, the

Cashmere Chamber of Commerce said that Liberty Orchards has made Cashmere "a traveler destination."

On Aplets & Cotlets' Facebook announcement about closing, hundreds of people commented, many calling the upcoming closure "heartbreaking" and "sad." Many shared memories about touring the factory.

"I have been enjoying Aplets & Cotlets for over 50 years. I truly hope someone buys the business and continues the tradition," said one comment.

Liberty Orchards was founded in 1920 by two Armenian immigrants, Mark Balaban and Armen Tertsgian.

The two started their venture by buying a small orchard, but times were tough, and they searched for ways to make use of surplus fruit. After research and development, they launched their first candy line, an apple and walnut confection based on the famous Near Eastern candy known as Turkish Delight.

This they called Aplets, the "confection of the fairies."

A few years later, they created a second product, Cotlets, made with apricots and walnuts.

Over the decades, the company expanded its product line to include Fruit Delights, Desert Delights, Fruitlets, Orchard Bars and other offerings.

Since 1920, three generations of family members have managed the business.

The second generation, John Chakirian and Richard Odabashian, ran the business from 1956 into the 1980s. Since then, Greg Taylor, the third generation, has served as company president.

Taylor said the fourth-generation family members didn't grow up in Cashmere and have their own careers and families elsewhere, which is why there's no one to carry on the business.

## YEAR

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tenant from overseas inspect several local office buildings. To get inside one of the buildings you had to run the gauntlet through an encampment of homeless people.

One of the company officials just wouldn't do it, out of fear or indignation or both.

"The problem has become so insidious, it's driven patrons out," Holzgang said. "People are genuinely fearful. And it's not panic, it's rational. It's chasing people out of our city, it's chasing people out of our state."

AJ Brown helps run LeadsRx, a small Portland software company.

The firm battled its way through the pandemic, through the remote working, the virtual chats. LeadsRx borrowed more than \$235,000 through the federal Paycheck Protection Program, which helped avoid layoffs.

A bigger challenge was worker safety. LeadsRx operated out of WeWork's co-working space in Old Town. Shared offices posed a health problem in the pandemic era. Also, Brown and his partner wanted out of Old Town.

LeadsRX left its 900 square feet in Old Town in favor of 2,200 square feet south of downtown along South Macadam Avenue.

"Our lease wasn't up till April, but it was just unworkable for us to stay downtown," Brown said. "The riots, the homeless, the garbage... We'd just had enough of the smell of urine in the air."

### Cultural strain

The Standard has for decades been a pillar of downtown Portland. About 2,000 of the insurance company's 3,000 employees work downtown in two large buildings.

Last March, it sent them all home.

The pandemic hurt The Standard's bottom line. Vacancies soared in its downtown properties. The Stevens-Ness stationary company, a McDonald's, a 7-Eleven, a Starbucks and an independent coffee shop were among its long-time tenants that closed permanently.

But in terms of Standard's financial stability, the pandemic and other problems of 2020 did not pose an existential threat. The real issue at The Standard has been one of culture.

The company learned that a dispersed workforce poses enormous challenges. Some employees

love working from home and dread the thought of resuming the daily commute to their cubicle. Others struggle. They miss the camaraderie and teamwork.

People are working too much. When the computer and cellphone are in the next room rather than downtown, it's hard to stay away.

"Now work is at the dining room table," said Bob Speltz, The Standard's senior director of community relations. "And for some it's also their kids' classroom, a day-care center and a pet grooming station."

*"People are genuinely fearful. And it's not panic, it's rational. It's chasing people out of our city, it's chasing people out of our state."*

— Mike Holzgang, a real estate broker, on problems caused by homeless encampments in Portland

The Standard offered its employees more time off, it allowed people to roll over more of their paid time off from one year to the next. And it added some mental health care and a \$400 allowance for every employee to outfit their home offices.

Last week, Standard informed most of its employees they would continue to work from home until at least Sept. 7.

### 'We didn't see daylight until 11:30'

Twenty-five miles and a universe away from downtown Portland, Garry Hansen runs Lady-Lane Farm, a dairy operation that boasts 70 dairy cows.

He sells milk under his own Garry's Meadow Fresh label in old-fashioned glass bottles. He landed New Seasons as a customer. The high-end grocer is now his largest client.

When the pandemic hit, sales immediately plunged 30%. His prized glass bottles became hard to get because his grocer clients considered it unsafe to accept bottle returns.

But Lady-Lane doesn't just rely on grocery stores. Hansen also is a regular at several area farmers' markets. And recently, Lady-Lane opened its own retail operation at the farm. They've branched out into flavored milk, butter, and ice cream.

The Lady-Lane farmstand, as Hansen and his family call it, now generates 15% to 20% of sales, Hansen said.

The growing importance of the farm's on-site retail operation made the events of September even

more dangerous. Wildfires of unprecedented size were rampaging down the Clackamas and the Santiam drainages. The two giant blazes threatened to merge in the heavily forested foothills of southern Clackamas County.

The smoke was so thick, Hansen worried about health of his herd.

"That one morning, we didn't see daylight until about 11:30 in the morning," he recalls.

The farm got a lucky break when the heavy east wind that had been pushing the two huge fires in their direction eased. But spot fires were erupting all over

the area. The so-called Spangler Road fire had jumped Highway 213 and was two miles away. Lady-Lane Farm was directly in its path.

Farmers and ranchers all over southern Clackamas County faced similar straits. Hansen had joined in a community effort to move various herds from farms in immediate danger. On Sept. 10, it was his turn. The flames were too close.

It was dark by the time they got the last of the cattle loaded in to trailers and hauled to safer locations in Woodburn and Gervais.

In the end, the pandemic proved much more damaging to Lady-Lane's financial situation than the fires. But thanks in part to a federal relief loan, Hansen was able to keep his six employees and keep his farm intact.

### Oregonians seek a makeover

COVID-19 fundamentally changed most Americans' idea of recreation.

Air travel was out of the question, which canceled an untold number of vacations. Closer to home, the gym and swimming pool were closed. The ballet, the author readings at Powell's Books and the movie at the local multiplex were also closed or cancelled. Even the weekly pickup basketball game fell victim to the virus.

Stir-crazy Americans took up other pursuits in keeping with era of social distancing. Camping, bicycling, kayaking became red-hot. Curtis Trailers, a venerable Portland-based seller of campers and RVs, enjoyed its best month ever

last June as novice campers hit the road.

Nautilus, the Vancouver-based maker of stationary bikes and other home workout equipment, posted the best quarter in its history in December. Fourth quarter sales hit an all-time high of \$189 million, more than double the prior year.

Many Oregonians, stuck at home all day, decided it was past time for a drastic makeover.

Scott and Carol Director run Scott Director's Custom Furniture in Beaverton. Their business collapsed last spring after the shutdown orders. The couple took to telephoning their customers — their goal was 30 per day — urging them to consider buying a table, a hassock, some wall art, anything.

"It was very stressful, there were so many unknowns," Carol Director said. But things turned around.

"People weren't traveling, they were sitting home," Carol Director said. "They looked at their furniture and saw that they needed a new chair or couch."

"We had a reasonable year especially given we were closed two months," Scott Director said.

### 'Nobody diets during a pandemic'

In the forced isolation of the pandemic, some Oregonians wanted nothing more than to splurge on something a little special.

Zoe Buckley has been selling her own handmade cheesecakes at a number of local farmers' markets since 2005. She offers 32 flavors — everything from classic New York to key lime to tiramisu. A 3-inch, individually sized cheesecake goes for \$7, or four for \$25.

The year got off to horrendous start when markets shut down and it became difficult to impossible to buy sugar and some other ingredients in bulk.

When the neighborhood markets reopened, Buckley was there, wearing a state-of-the-art N95 facemask and fearing the worst.

Customers lined up in numbers she'd never before seen, she remembers, her voice thick with emotion. They bought as many cheesecakes as she could bake and also gave her tips and tearful thanks just for showing up.

"I was humbled," Buckley said. "The lesson is nobody diets during a pandemic. We were at a time when we couldn't go anywhere, we couldn't do anything. But we sure could treat ourselves to a fancy cheesecake."

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