Producer optimism falls sharply

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

SALEM — Farmer sentiment about the agricultural economy took a big hit in June for the second month in a row.

The Purdue University/CME Group Ag Economy Barometer — based on a monthly survey of 400 crop and livestock producers across the U.S. — declined sharply to a reading of 137 (relative to a baseline average index of 100).

The index measures farmer sentiment on current conditions and future expectation. It dropped 21 points from May's reading of 158, which was down 17 points from April.

"I wasn't surprised it went down, but I was surprised it went down as much as it did," said Jim Mintert, director of the Purdue Center for Commercial Agriculture.

Michael Langemeier, associate director of the center, said he also expected the index might weaken a little bit.

"Given the strong prices, I thought that would hold the index of current conditions up there a little bit. But obviously I was wrong," Langemeier said during the latest "Ag Barometer" podcast.

Corn and soybean prices were still strong by historical standards, but they were weaker than a month earlier, Mintert said.

"I think that probably contributed quite a bit to the negativity," he said. "I probably underestimated how much that was impacting people's perspective."

The index of current conditions fell 29 points from 178 in May to 149 in June, a pretty big drop, Mintert said.

"The index of future expectations fell as well, but it didn't fall nearly as much," he said.

That index fell 17 points from 149 in May to 132 in June.

Producers' view of their farm financial performance was really the driver with respect to current conditions. That index fell from 126 in May to 96 in June and fell 42 points from April.

That's a big drop in that financial performance index and a little surprising given the relative strength in crop prices compared with long-term history.

"This one surprised me more than the fact that the index of current conditions declined as much as it did," Langemeier said.

There's a lot of uncertainty about return prospects this fall, but they're still pretty good. That leads him to wonder if producers are thinking prices are not going to be as strong this fall and not as good moving into 2022 as they were earlier in 2021, he said.

Mintert said it's important to remember the survey is asking producers how they feel about their farm's financial performance and not asking them to look at their balance sheet or projected income statement.

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Owner Tara Sager poses for a picture behind the counter of the recently opened Rebel Woolworks store on Tuesday, July 20, 2021. The speciality crafts store, which sells hand-dyed yarn, opened last Saturday during Crazy Days in La Grande.

A colorful yarn

Locally dyed yarn business opens in La Grande

By CARLOS FUENTES
The Observer

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

A selection of hand-dyed yarn, including Tara Sager's specialty "The Good Red," await shoppers and stitchers on Tuesday, July 20, 2021, at Rebel Woolworks, 1113 Adams Ave., La Grande.

LA GRANDE — Rebel Woolworks, La Grande's newest — and only — locally dyed yarn business, opened on Saturday, July 17.

Rebel Woolworks, 1113 Adams Ave., might be new to downtown La Grande, but owner Tara Sager has been selling her own yarn since 2010.

"It feels surreal. I started off online, and it just exploded, and then I won the business plan competition and I was able to get this space," Sager said. "It's been an insane amount of hard work, but totally worth it."

Sager was the winner of a business plan competition hosted by several La Grande organizations in 2021. In the competition, participants created their own business plan for a store that could move into a physical location.

Part of the winning prize was a fund to launch the business and provide technical assistance. Two months after winning the competition, Sager's yarn business officially opened.

"It's always exciting when a new business opens downtown," Taylor Scroggins, La Grande Main Street's executive director, said in a press release. "What Tara is doing with these yarn colorways is breathtaking. Rebel Woolworks is going to be an excellent addition to the fabric of downton La Grande's business community."

Sager, who moved to La Grande in May 2020 with her husband and three daughters, brings a newcomer's perspective to downtown. She hopes to work with other businesses to support the La Grande downtown community.

"I'm just really excited to be here. It's kind of like a dream come true," Sager said. "As soon as I get over all of this grand opening stuff, I want to get on some boards and committees and really help to grow the downtown area, because it has so much potential."

Business plan was a decade in the making

Prior to moving to La Grande, Sager and her family lived in several places, including Alaska, where she first started dyeing her own yarn to practice knitting.

Sager realized there was a large market for indie-dyed — or independently made — yarn when she posted some of her yarn online, and her business took off.

"I tried selling, and within the first month, I was selling out within 10 minutes of a shop update," she said.

After one year of selling yarn, Sager's family decided to move to Oregon, where Sager worked as a construction project engineer for several years. The family lived in an RV in the Mt. Hood area for five years.

In 2020, Sager decided to return to dyeing yarn, and the family was set to move to Pendleton. However, this changed when she drove through La Grande for the first time.

"It was just what I was looking for," she said. "It felt like home. It felt like everything I had been looking for."

Not long after the family moved to La Grande, Sager's yarn business outgrew their RV, and they bought a home. It didn't take long for Rebel Woolworks to grow too big for the house, and Sager began looking for a physical location.

Every month, Sager releases a new collection. July's theme was "Pacific Northwest Road Trip," and the August theme will be "Disney Villains." Rebel Woolworks has expanded its offerings to 62 different colorways.

Each collection takes far more work than most people would expect, according to Sager.

"I have to order all the yarn, dye it all, dry it all, twist it all up, label it and package it," Sager said. "It's not just taking yarn and throwing it in the back. It takes a lot of time."

See, **Yarn**/Page B6

Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Sweet Retreat serves ice cream and toppings mixed to order on a tray cooled to 2 degrees below zero. The new business sells custom-made rolled ice cream in downtown Joseph.

Try some rolled ice cream at Sweet Retreat

Owner may add sub sandwiches to menu at ice cream shop

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — We all like ice cream, but have you ever had it rolled in small tubes with all your favorite toppings? Tracee Page is offering that now at Sweet Retreat in Joseph.

"Not a lot of people have it and not a lot of people have seen it," she said. "That's why I thought it would do well here."

Pick one of her signature orders or have one custom made. Page will pour the liquid ice cream base in vanilla, chocolate or cotton candy — much like that from which soft ice cream is made — on a tray cooled to 2 degrees below zero. She then mixes in toppings, drizzles in other ingredients to the customer's order, often chopping them with spatulas that look like putty knives.

Once the base is cooled to a point where it's workable, she spreads it flat on the tray and cuts it into sections that can be rolled. The rolls are picked up with tongs and placed in a paper cup.

Whipped cream and more toppings can then be added.

There are no cones at Sweet Retreat, but that hasn't slowed Page's business, situated at 203 N. Main St.

"We have gotten a lot of attention because it's something new and different. People really enjoy being able to watch their ice cream be made fresh right in front of them," she said of the shop that opened Memorial Day Weekend. "We get a lot of traffic through here and it's very artsy and craftsy, so I thought it would do well" — and it has.

Page said she came on the idea after seeing rolled ice cream

See, **Sweet**/Page B2

Workers increasingly confident about their prospects

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — One in seven Oregon workers lost their jobs in the spring of 2020 as the pandemic hit, shutting bars, restaurants, salons and thousands of other businesses.

Many people returned to work within weeks but remained uneasy into 2021 amid the pandemic's unprecedented toll on Oregon's economy. Worries spiked again last winter amid a steep rise in pandemic cases, according to survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Now, as the state emerges from the pandemic's shadow, Oregonians have become considerably more optimistic about their job outlook.

In late June, when the Census Bureau asked if they expect anyone in their household will lose employment income in the next four weeks, just 11% said yes.

Just over a year earlier, as the pandemic was rocking the state, 41% had responded yes to that same question.

Workers' growing optimism parallels a hopeful outlook from Oregon employers. A similar survey of small-business owners found that three quarters expect they will return to "normal" operations within six months.

Additionally, Oregonians' upbeat outlook is accompanied by a sharp rise in wages. Oregon's average wage is up by 6.7% since the pandemic started, which translates into an average of $3,900 a year more for full-time workers.

The Census Bureau survey is a blunt instrument, which tracks respondents by state — Oregon's responses generally align with national attitudes — but not by demographic groups. So it may be that some workers find less reason for optimism.

In Oregon, industries with more diverse workers tended to be the ones most battered by the pandemic.

Women, who represented just 41% of jobless claims before the pandemic, were 51% of claims during the pandemic, according to a new analysis by Oregon Employment Department economist Gail Krumenauer.

And Krumenauer noted that while Latino workers represent an especially high percentage of the hard-hit leisure and hospitality sector, the share of jobless claims by Latino workers actually fell during the pandemic.

Demographic information is often absent from jobless claims forms, Krumenauer wrote, and it's conceivable that for some reason Latino workers were less likely to be laid off than their peers.

But she said it's also possible that "barriers to unemployment benefits may have also affected this or any other demographic," especially those who don't speak English.

If so, that means some workers who most needed aid during the pandemic couldn't get it. And it suggests that we have yet to gauge just how severe the pandemic was in some communities — information the Census Bureau's survey may not measure, either.