

Fairs

Continued from Page A1

Carnival constraints

At the beginning of January, Umatilla County Fair's longtime carnival provider, Davis Amusement Cascadia, announced it was closing.

CEO Michael J. Davis said the cost of operating rides is very high and the supply of qualified, motivated employees to operate those rides is very low — not to mention the cost of insuring the rides.

With high fuel costs to transport those rides in a big state like Oregon with long distances in between county fairs, it was extremely difficult for the 80-year-old family business to turn a profit, Davis said.

"It was always, and still is, a high-volume, low-return industry, which means you can generate and touch a lot of revenue, but you don't get to keep a lot of that revenue because your expenses are really high," Davis said.

Rural county fairs are small

in attendance as it is, which makes it much more difficult to turn a profit, he said.

The ripple effect of Davis Amusement Cascadia's closure put not just Umatilla County in a bind, but the eight other county fairs as well as carnivals shifted based on supply and demand.

Fair dates in Oregon are stacked on top of each other for most of the short fair season, requiring the small number of carnival operators to split into multiple units to cover every week, Winegar said.

It is difficult to find replacements because most of the carnival equipment is already scheduled and booked for the year, she said.

Davis said he fears this is the beginning of the end for carnivals at smaller county fairs. He thinks there will be fewer and fewer smaller carnival providers at rural county fairs each year until they are at a premium, and at that point, they will just go to urban county fairs with larger audiences.

A part of America is dying

right before our eyes, he said, much like the circus did a few years ago.

"Everybody blamed the loss of the elephant, but that wasn't it," he said. "(The Ringling Brothers) were facing the same thing that (carnival providers) were on a different scale."

Fair market

With or without a carnival, it is becoming harder and harder to draw people to the county fair.

"In the age of online shopping and digital convenience, fairs are challenged with drawing patrons out from behind their devices, in their air-conditioned environments and through our gates," said Angie McNalley, general manager of Umatilla County Fairgrounds. "You're not going to get that carnival experience online."

The loss of a carnival also affects parents who attend, she said.

"For parents, the carnival occupies the kids, and without it, kids are going to get bored," McNalley said. "Kids aren't

looking to buy jewelry and look at exhibits."

While the fair brings school-age kids in 4-H and FFA who show animals, the goal is to attract others who may not be showing animals, and the loss of a carnival makes that next to impossible, McNalley said.

Gate revenues at the Grant County Fair were down by more than \$1,000 last year without a carnival compared to previous years, according to budget documents, without even counting the loss of a share of the carnival revenue.

Fairs across the state scrape by, receiving just \$53,000 annually in dedicated public funding from state lottery dollars, Winegar said.

It costs upwards of \$100,000 to operate a fair each year, she said, without even addressing structural and maintenance costs at the fairgrounds.

Winegar said, although the fair also lowered the ticket price last year for children 10 and younger to make the fair more affordable, the loss of the carnival impacted attendance.

And even though Grant County will have alternate entertainment such as obstacle courses, bouncy houses and ax-throwing this year, she said it can't replace the carnival.

The future

In the legislative short session this year, OFA planned to request an additional \$25,000 in operating funds for each county fairgrounds statewide, Winegar said.

OFA President Bart Noll said that is a modest amount when factoring in for inflation.

Noll said OFA is also requesting funding for a \$250,000 study to determine maintenance and structural work that needs to be done at county fairgrounds statewide.

"So far, we're getting positive signals and we're stepping up to the front of the line, and that is something we have not done in the past," he said.

In urban areas, fairs are an essential part of the community, but in rural areas they are the focus, Noll said.

The ag foundation is stron-

ger in rural areas too, especially for youth, Baker County Fairgrounds Manager Angie Turner said.

"(The fair's ag tradition) is so good for the kids, to start something and see it through all year," she said. "They raise those animals all year long and show them every year at the fair."

Baker County didn't lose its carnival in the recent shakeup. Turner said, except for 2018, the county has done without a carnival for the last 10 years, and the fair has been able to handle the financial impact to continue providing opportunities for kids.

With or without carnivals, fairs will always be around because the ag-based tradition of a rural county fair cannot be replaced with anything else, Winegar said.

"When I was growing up, (the fair) was always just the place you wanted to be — your friends, your family, everybody was there," she said. "It is, and always has been, the event of the year in Grant County."

Timber

Continued from Page A1

expensive clash in November 2020.

The agreement — somewhere between a handshake deal and legally binding agreement — incorporates three key pieces.

The first outlines that the two sides will come together to create a habitat conservation plan that rules over 30 million acres of public and private timberlands throughout the state, protecting endangered species and updating timber practices.

The second calls for all parties to support legislation to protect forest watersheds by restricting aerial spraying of pesticides and herbicides. The bill also outlines implementation of a state-of-the-art system to notify neighbors of aerial spraying.

Lastly, it widens buffer zones for streams within the Rogue-Siskiyou region of southern Oregon. New legislation also would expand stream buffers along salmon, steelhead and bull trout streams to bring forest practices into line with the rest of western Oregon. The deal is predicated on the idea that both sides agree on what is the best science to use for decisions.

Agreeing to the deal were Hampton Lumber, Weyerhaeuser, Roseburg Forest Products, Seneca Sawmill Company, Hancock Natural Resource Group, Stimson Lumber, Greenwood Resources, Campbell Global, Pope Resources, Port Blakely and the Oregon Small Woodlands Association.

In the environmental camp, Oregon Wild, Wild Salmon Center, Oregon Stream Protection Coalition, Beyond Toxics, Audubon Society of Portland, Cascadia Wildlands, Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, Trout Unlimited, Northwest Guides and Anglers Association and the Oregon League of Conservation voters all signed.

According to Casey Roscoe, vice president for public affairs for Seneca, this agreement is a step to see if there's a shared vision between the two sides for the future of forest practices, which accounts for sustainability and Oregon's ecosystem. She's cautiously optimistic that this deal represents a fresh start for both sides.

"That vision is of healthy trees. It's of thriving wildlife. It's of cool, clean water and world class recreation. It's of renewable building materials and other wood products," Roscoe said.

"That is our vision. What we're hoping is perhaps that can be their vision too, and if that's true, if we do have, in fact, shared vision, then maybe we can come to the table and talk about how to make that happen and work toward it, because we're all on the same planet."

Bob Rees, executive director of the Northwest Guides and Anglers Association, said the deal shows good faith by the timber industry to hear out conservationists.

"The pesticide application on these lands and waterways is of course of great concern to us, the real punch in the MOU is if the timber interests agreed to formulate this habitat conservation plan that's on the table," Rees said. "It's a good thing, and the science is already developed, but we haven't implemented these practices on state or private lands."

Rees recalled when he started as a professional fishing guide in 1996 and fishermen were allowed to catch five of the six species of salmonids in the rivers of Oregon's north coast. Over time, with warming temperatures and rising levels of dissolved oxygen, the list of endangered species slowly grew and depleted runs of every type of salmon, crippling the

state's fishing industry.

"If the negotiations are successful, it really shows an effort by private landowners to recognize the value of other natural resources other than timber that their lands harbor," Rees said.

Jim James, executive director of the Oregon Small Woodlands Association, is one of the sponsors of the three initiatives from the timber industry that will be set aside now.

"The real benefit is that we're getting the opportunity to sit down and talk with each other to find a compromise," James said.

But not everyone is feeling as hopeful as those directly involved in the deal.

Republicans in the Legislature criticize the deal for putting them in a less stable position around the discussion of Oregon's proposed greenhouse gas reduction bill, Senate Bill 1530.

On Thursday, Senate Republican Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass, went on the "Lars Larson Show" to denounce the deal, saying it made his life more complicated.

"What they basically said is, if you want your timber industry's pesticide bill to pass, you're going to have to stick around for cap-and-trade, and we simply can't do that," Baertschiger told

Larson. "The timber industry didn't do us any favor. I don't know who is advising them politically, but I'd give them their walking papers."

That would be Greg Miller, who said the deal is a shared recognition between the timber industry and conservation groups of the diverse benefits Oregon's forests provide and the need for more meaningful efforts on forest issues.

Baertschiger has characterized the deal as big corporate timber selling out to Oregon's Democratic supermajority and hurting the state's smaller timber interests.

James, representing woodland owners, feels otherwise.

"My perception is that, if we can get to the compromise and stop the wars, it would be beneficial to every forest landowner in Oregon," he said. "Oftentimes folks try to separate the family landowner from the forest products industry, but there's a reality that family woodland owners need a strong forest products industry so when they harvest, they have value."

The next step in moving toward final solidification of this deal is passing new laws on aerial spraying of pesticides. According to Miller, that bill is currently in the drafting stage.



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