

Regenerative ranching aid grows

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

PORTLAND — A Portland-based conservation group is forming what it says will be the country's largest program to support regenerative ranching across the West.

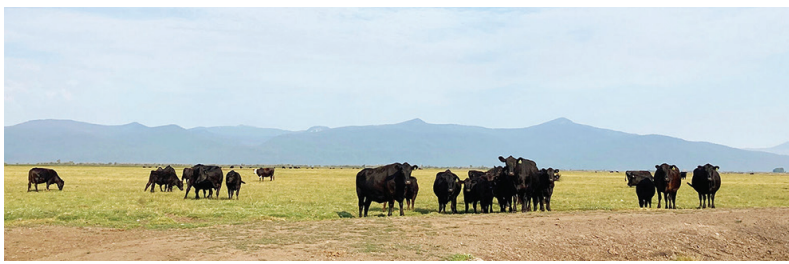
Sustainable Northwest received a \$488,500 grant from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust to roll out the initiative, partnering with Country Natural Beef to help ranchers adopt grazing practices that build healthy soils and improve water retention.

The program aims to include 100 ranches and 6.5 million acres of rangeland by 2025.

"When we think about regenerative (agriculture), we really start with the soil," said Dylan Kruse, vice president of Sustainable Northwest. "If you have healthy soil, you'll have a healthier landscape."

For example, rotational grazing is a strategy that falls under regenerative ranching. Livestock are rotated frequently between pastures, allowing forage plants to recover and deepen their root systems.

"You get increased carbon sequestration, you get better water filtration



Sustainable Northwest/Contributed Photo

A ranch in the Klamath Basin. Sustainable Northwest received a \$488,500 grant from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust to roll out what it says will be the country's largest program to support regenerative ranching across the West.



Probert

and capture, you get better nutrient management and better forage production," Kruse said. "That can help the bottom line for ranchers."

In late 2020, Sustainable Northwest was awarded funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to put some of these practices to the test on four Oregon ranches. That project is still underway.

But Kruse said they wanted to go bigger. There is no single, large-scale program looking at regenerative



Kruse

ranching, which he sees as a gap in the market.

"This regenerative space is just exploding right now," Kruse said, citing more than \$50 billion in U.S.

organic food sales in 2019. "Responding to those demands is really significant."

Country Natural Beef, a ranching cooperative based in Redmond, was founded on the premise of marketing naturally raised beef to local consumers. The co-op today has 100 members in 14 Western states, and sells beef

to natural and organic supermarkets including Whole Foods and New Seasons Market.

Dan Probert, a Wallowa County rancher and the marketing director for Country Natural Beef, said the alliance with Sustainable Northwest makes sense for their members.

"We want to call out the attributes that we have that are important to our consumers, so they feel good about the products they pick," Probert said, adding that ranchers today face increased pressure and competition from plant-based meat substitutes among environmentally minded shoppers.

Probert Ranch is one of the four operations currently working with Sustainable Northwest under the NRCS grant. The ranch has about 21,000 acres in the Zumwalt Prairie near Joseph, divided into more than 100 pastures to facilitate rotational grazing.

Probert said he thinks of regenerative ranching as a "triple bottom line" — promoting healthy cows, healthy people and healthy land. With the new regenerative ranching program, he said Sustainable Northwest will provide them with objective data to validate these claims.

"We use extensive monitoring to tell if we're moving toward or away from our objectives," he said. "We know we have to be ahead of the game in that space."

Steve Moore, executive director of the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, said the program "provides an innovative, sustainable solution that helps our natural landscapes thrive while simultaneously growing local business."

"Ranchers in the Pacific Northwest play a vital role in helping our region thrive but face a variety of challenges, including development, climbing costs, climate change and more," Moore said. "Organizations like Sustainable Northwest are doing important work to help support the individuals and families who run these spaces."

Kruse, with Sustainable Northwest, said the group plans to hire a new regenerative ranching program manager by the end of March. They will then get to work enrolling the first cohort of ranches in the program, mapping their properties and developing individual grazing plans.

"It's voluntary, it's incentive-based. For us, that's good conservation," Kruse said. "It's good for the community, and it's good for the economy."

Research could aid bees, farmers

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

CORVALLIS — New research on native bees could help Oregon farmers, support pollinators and boost public knowledge about wild bees.

Oregon State University researchers this February released the results of a 2019 statewide native bee survey, a project within the volunteer-run Oregon Bee Atlas, an initiative founded in 2018 that tracks wild bee species and their plant hosts across the state.

Andony Melathopoulos, OSU Extension's pollinator health specialist and assistant professor, said this "powerful biodiversity dataset" not only tracks wild bee species but analyzes their interactions with flowering plants — documenting which flowers certain bees prefer, for example.

Melathopoulos said this kind of information could help farmers more strategically support local bee populations, which is not only good for bees but may give growers the ability to boost crop yields and market their products as high-biodiversity.

Lincoln "Linc" Best, lead taxonomist for the Oregon Bee Atlas, agreed.

"I think this will really empower the farm sector, the forestry sector," said Best.

The data was collected by volunteers via the Oregon Bee Atlas. Some of the volunteers are now "Master Melittologists" — a melittologist studies bees — in a program modeled after OSU's Master Gardener program.

In the program, OSU researchers train volunteers to locate, identify and pre-



Oregon State University/Contributed Photo

OSU researcher Andony Melathopoulos says new data could help farmers support the bees their crops depend on.

serve bees from the more than 620 species of native bees in Oregon.

For this dataset, in 2019, volunteers submitted 25,022 bee specimens from all Oregon counties. This represented 224 unique bee species and 45 bee genera. Volunteers also collected samples from 352 unique flowering genera, resulting in the largest contemporary state-level database tracking interactions between bees and plant hosts.

The volunteers also made two big discoveries.

Master Melittologist Judi Maxwell of Grants Pass found a rare small stonecrop mason bee for the first time in Oregon.

Another rare bee called the lava hole bee was found by Master Melittologist Ellen Watrous of Corvallis — the first documented in Oregon since 1969.

Many of the 25,022 bee specimens were found on or near farms, which Melathopoulos said is evidence that Oregon's diverse crop mix supports bee populations.

"Agriculture is often implicated with bee declines," he

said. "That's sometimes true, but we're not the Midwest. Here in Oregon, farmers are doing a good job overall, and specialty crops are actually contributing to many diverse types of bees."

Using the new research, farmers can further step up their efforts to support bees.

Farmers will soon be able to track which wild bee species have been found in their area and the types of plants those bees prefer. From there, Melathopoulos said, growers can see which bee-friendly plants or trees they already have and what they can add to "complete the suite."

Melathopoulos and Best said they are working with several Oregon farms, including Willamette Valley Vineyards, in trials this year to explore which plants can support wild bees.

Best and his team are currently developing an interactive online Oregon Bee Atlas with a map and simple user interface so that farmers can search for particular bee species or plants.

"We're working hard to publish that in the next few months," said Best.

Oregon wine sales are booming

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon wine producers are outpacing other wine regions in sales but face the same industry-wide problem of aging core consumers, experts say.

"It's pretty stunning how far ahead of the pack Oregon was in 2021," said Tom Danowski, president and CEO of the Oregon Wine Board.

With 24% sales growth last year, the state is "the best performing region out of all the majors" and continues to be the best positioned for more growth, said Rob McMillan, executive vice president and founder of Silicon Valley Bank.

"Oregon is rocking it. Oregon is the best thing going on in the wine industry, as far as I'm concerned," McMillan said Feb. 15 during the virtual Oregon Wine Symposium.

The industry's strong financial results don't mean it can afford to rest on its laurels, especially with worrying trends developing, he said.

Wine consumption has flattened after a long period of growth while consumption of spirits has been growing and taking market share, McMillan said.

The wine industry overall is too reliant on older consumers and Oregon shares the same problem, he said.

For example, when asked what they'd bring to a party, roughly half of consumers older than 65 said "wine" in a survey, he said.

For other age groups, the percentage who answered "wine" was 30% or less, McMillan said. "If we're not collecting mindshare for peo-

ple under 65, that's a serious threat we need to address."

Higher wine prices at restaurants and reduced sales of economically priced wines at grocery stores don't bode well, as they often serve as "on-ramps" for new consumers, he said.

The wine industry is an "incredibly good steward of the land" but that environmental consciousness often "doesn't end up on the label," which is a missed opportunity, McMillan said.

One potential to create new "on-ramps" is the rising popularity of smaller wine containers with a lower price point, he said.

"We can't depend on 65-plus consumers, but that's what we're doing and that's a mistake," McMillan said. "We've got to market to people younger than 65."

On the positive side, the wine industry has found ways to capitalize on changing consumer behaviors during the coronavirus pandemic, said Lesley Berglund, a coach with the Wine Industry Sales Education company.

"For most wineries, our direct-to-consumer business is better than ever," she said.

Corporate sales "boomed" during the pandemic as companies sought to provide clients with "virtual experiences," she said.

Those purchases often had a "surprising ripple impact" later on, in the form of holiday gift buying and in-person tasting, she said.

"We couldn't have imagined it two years ago," Berglund said. "If we did it correctly, 80% of those drove more business."

Wine club members have

become more active during the pandemic, participating in more activities than just accepting "auto-shipments," she said.

"They're more engaged across different channels," which has boosted sales, Berglund said.

Consumers generally have been buying more items online, which has helped direct sales, she said. Wineries should seize on that technological change.

"This is the time to invest and make sure we leave no stone unturned to ride the wave, to mix our metaphors," Berglund said.

Due to concerns about disease transmission, wineries have offered more "private seated experiences" in tasting rooms, rather than having people belly up to the bar, she said.

Done properly, such seated experiences translate to a higher "conversion" to wine sales and larger orders, she said.

Of course, the downside is that such a strategy can require more room capacity, staff and training, Berglund said. "We actually need more labor, not less."

The robust sales seen by Oregon wineries led to a stellar year in mergers and acquisitions in 2021, with more on the way, experts said.

"Oregon has incredible value to price," both in terms of wine quality and real estate, said Erik McLaughlin, CEO of Metis, a merger consulting firm.

Wine companies with "portfolios" of brands have been getting feedback that Oregon is an important regional category, he said.

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