

## A sign of the times for Oregon agriculture

New and improved crop identification signs help Oregonians learn about ag

Motorists traveling the highways of Oregon can learn a little something about agriculture in the near future when new and improved crop identification signs are erected as part of an educational effort spearheaded by the Agri-Business Council of Oregon. Between now and next spring, there could be hundreds of new signs posted on farms located along major thoroughfares around the state, sure to answer the question, "I wonder what is growing in that field right there?"

"These signs are a great opportunity to show the traveling public what a tremendous and unique diversity of crops we have in this state," says Katy Coba, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

"ODA is a big supporter of efforts to teach the public more about an important sector of Oregon's economy. If people know a little more about what we produce, they are better able to appreciate the efforts of our farmers and ranchers."

Chances are motorists have already noticed the older white signs with green lettering that identify the crop in the field. The sign program actually began in the early 1980s when the organization Oregon Women for Agriculture started putting up signs on their own farms in the central Willamette Valley. Those teaching tools became so popular that other producers wanted to erect signs on their own farms.

When the task of providing and coordinating an increasing number of crop identification signs became too large, the Agri-Business Council (ABC) took over. A newly designed crop sign is now available and is re-energizing the effort. By the end of the summer, motorists will be able to see them.

"Ultimately, we're trying to educate all Oregonians - not just urban residents - about the vast diversity of product grown in our state," says ABC executive director Geoff Horning.

"The dimensions of the sign will be the same as in the past, but a visual component is part of the redesign. There will be an actual picture of the crop as well as the lettering, so that a sign posted in a field of alfalfa, for example, will include artwork as well as the name of the crop being grown. Motorists can easily see the lettering on the sign at 65 miles per hour, but

the picture will enhance the identification."

Also on the sign will be an enhanced version of the "Landmark of Quality" logo associated with ABC that has been part of the old signs. The logo is a green outline of the state. There will also be the phrase "Oregon Agriculture. Everywhere. Every Day.™" which has been the theme of a public image campaign developed by the Keeping Agriculture Viable (KAV) Committee. KAV is a standing committee of ABC.

The Agri-Business Council is still developing a plan to strategically place the signs, but it is expected that Interstate 5 and I-84 will be major targets - as long as there is agriculture next to the right-of-way. Individual farmers not living along the freeways are not excluded from the program. Producers can purchase the signs from ABC for \$43.50 each (plus shipping and handling costs) and place them where they wish. The farmers are responsible for maintaining the signs throughout the year.

With more than 225 different commodities found in the state, it is unrealistic to think that crop identification signs will be posted for everything that grows in Oregon. But there are as many as three dozen different crops produced along a 45-mile stretch of I-5 between Portland and Salem alone. Travelers can expect many of them to be identified by signs within the next year.

Some of those crops might be obvious even to the non-agriculturalist. Christmas tree farms will be clearly identified by the signs. But less identifiable nursery crops like iris and holly are expected to have signs as well. Oregon is a major producer of hazelnuts, but even some native Oregonians might not be able to pick out a hazelnut orchard. The crop identification signs will help them out. Grass seed species will benefit from signs that will help distinguish bentgrass from bluegrass, fescue from ryegrass. Few people have trouble recognizing the Willamette Valley's variety of berries when the fruit has been harvested and is up close. But the signs can identify those berries when they are still in the field.

Plans for other parts of the state are expected to include signs that introduce the public to apple, cherry and pear orchards in the Rogue Valley and the Columbia Gorge. The grains of Eastern Oregon will be

pointed out to passers by whether it is wheat, barley, oats, or canola. Garden vegetables such as green beans, broccoli, carrots, and tomatoes can also be identified by the signs. Those who raise livestock - even some of the more exotic species - can also participate in the program by placing signs in the pastures where the animals feed. Some crops have already been harvested this year, but it's not too early to get prepared for next year.

"Despite a late start this year, our goal is to have 100 new signs placed statewide by the end of 2007," says Horning. "The months ahead will still be prime time for some crops, like Christmas trees and several nursery crops. But we would like to get the signs out and about now so that farmers are ready to go next spring when their crop is in season."

The crop identification signs are just one of several strategic efforts undertaken by the Agri-Business Council. ABC has a presence at the State Fair, Ag Fest, and various paid media campaigns. All are addressing a critical need to educate an increasingly urbanized Oregon about the importance of agriculture. A recent survey given to ag industry leaders asked about public perception. Nearly all respondents believe Oregonians do care about agriculture, they just don't understand it very well.

"The call to action for farmers is to do what they can to educate the public, and placing these signs in the field can help," says Horning. "The call to action for Oregon consumers is to learn more about agriculture and what it means to their daily lives. We think the signs can be a part of that education."

For more information contact Geoff Horning at (503) 241-1487.

## HHS class of 1997 to hold reunion

All 1997 graduates of Heppner High School are invited to several activities on Saturday, August 11. There will be golfing, a pool party, and dinner and music at the Heppner Elks Club.

For more information on times and cost contact Brandi Sweeney at 676-5530.

## Health studies and research put blackberries in the pink

As the U.S. leader in blackberry production, Oregon benefits from health message

It sounds impressive and it is. Blackberries are the number one antioxidant food per serving of 1,130 grocery store products tested as part of a collaborative scientific study. Meanwhile, a second study identifies an extract derived from fresh blackberries that reduces cancerous tumors and prevents the spread of cancer cells in animal models.

Combined, the two studies puts some emphasis on health claims made by the blackberry industry. That is important to Oregon, the nation's leading producer of commercially-grown blackberries.

"Everyone has known for years that eating berries is good for you," says Kris Anderson, manager of the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Commodity Commissions Program. "With the latest research on blackberries, we know even more about how much and why those berries are good for you."

The health message is being aggressively pushed by the Oregon Raspberry and Blackberry Commission (ORBC), which is using assessments from growers and processors to promote the industry and contribute to blackberry research.

With the perfect climate and ideal soils, Oregon grows nearly all of the nation's commercial blackberries - including the renowned Marionberry, the premium of all blackberries - and the industry has a production value of more than \$35 million. So anything that helps create consumer demand for blackberries will help Oregon's agricultural economy.

Consumer and production trends show the blackberry industry in a growth mode. Those in the business say it has to do with people changing their diet to include more healthy foods.

"Aging baby boomers are more concerned about health and they want to live longer," says Dave Dunn, manager of Willamette Valley Fruit Company of Salem, and ORBC. "They're staring cancer and other health issues in the face, so they are changing their diets and habits. Blackberries are really good for the digestive system, aging properties, and more. Plus, they taste good."

This is not a case of berry wars with blackberries claiming to be better than their cousins. But the

recent study by U.S. and Norwegian scientists on the antioxidant value of various foods certainly gives blackberries a boost. Antioxidants neutralize the effects of free radicals - those unstable compound molecules that can attack human cells and damage DNA.

In the study, several berries grown in Oregon crack the top ten including strawberries, cranberries, raspberries, and blueberries. But none match the antioxidant content of blackberries. The industry is also touting the fact that consumers don't need to eat a lot of blackberries to get the antioxidant benefit - a half cup a day of fresh or frozen will do.

Findings from the second study are concise and clear: Cyanidin-3-glucoside (C3G) is a natural product derived from blackberries, and it exhibits chemopreventive and chemotherapeutic activity.

"C3G has extremely high cancer fighting potential," says Cat McKenzie, marketing and promotions coordinator for ORBC. "It not only stops existing tumors from growing, it shrinks them and stops them from spreading to other parts of the body. The researchers studied lung and skin cancer with good results. They were so impressed that they took out a patent for the C3G extraction process."

Commercial production of the blackberry extract is a ways off and more studies need to be conducted, but there is a great deal of potential and excitement regarding the natural health benefits of blackberries. While the message is being marketed to consumers, there is a corresponding message to Oregon growers.

"There is a sense of pride in the fact that the growers are farming and producing something that has value for people's lives, not just that they are putting something out on the table," says Dunn. "Blackberries are healthy and good, and they are fun to eat."

Those health benefits are not confined to fresh berries. A tablespoon of grandma's homemade blackberry jam can also be a source of goodness.

No one is suggesting a steady diet of high-sugar foods like jam or preserves, but the fact is processing does not radically affect the health components of blackberries. Dunn says, in some ways, there are actually nutritional advantages to processed berries.

"One the fresh side, because of shelf life considerations, you have to pick the berry before it is ripe, and before all the flavor and nutritional value has reached its peak," says Dunn.

"In many cases, the processed berry is picked by machine and it won't be released from the bush until it is fully ripe. That type of fruit will not hold up in the fresh market. The processed market most often has berries with all the health components locked in."

The blackberry health message transcends all markets. Local consumers have the added benefit of a fresh, sustainable product. But the export market is interested in a healthy food

no matter where it comes from.

Oregon's top agricultural export customer - Japan - has been ahead of the curve in marketing healthy, nutritional food products. The health theme has played well for blueberry exports to Japan.

Although blackberries and their caneberry relatives have not yet caught on overseas, efforts by the industry and ODA in recent years have raised awareness in Japan and there is an opportunity to continue the discussion.

Meanwhile, the domestic marketing of blackberries has been bolstered by the latest health news. The market for frozen blackberries sold in ply bags is showing increases of up to 12 percent.

"Consumers, who are buying poly bag berries as either berry blends or individual berries, are more health conscious, using the berries in smoothies and other applications," says Gery Amos, marketing director of RainSweet Inc. - a cooperative of Oregon berry growers.

"We are beginning to see blackberries available in all major grocery markets year round, both fresh and frozen, as a result of consumer awareness of health benefits."

As Oregon blackberries continue to be harvested this month, the industry will continue its campaign of public awareness, confident that an informed consumer will choose to be a big berry eater.

For more information contact Cat McKenzie at (800) 859-0355 or (541) 456-2264.

## Painted Hills auto tour offered

John Day Fossil Beds National Monument staff will offer a Painted Hills Unit auto tour on Saturday, August 4.

This two-hour tour will travel along the roads of the Painted Hills and feature the cultural history and geological landscape of the area.

The Painted Hills auto tour will begin at 10 a.m. at the Painted Hills Unit picnic area, 10 miles west of Mitchell. Participants will need to bring their own vehicle, and good tires are recommended for the gravel roads.

Reservations are not needed and there is no fee.

For more information contact the monument at 541-987-2333.

## Marriage Licenses

The Morrow County Clerk's Office has released the following marriage license report:

-July 30: Robert Wesley Crum, 29, Echo and Lauren Denise Scofield, 27, Echo.

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