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FFA students speak to county commissioners

Topics covered are environment and mental health

By David Sykes

Two Ione Future Farmers of America (FFA) students spoke to the Morrow County Commissioners at their meeting last week, and the topics covered were: "Want to Know How to Protect the Environment? Ask a Farmer; and Mental Health in the Agricultural Industry."

Two Ione Future Farmers of America students, Grace Ogden (left) and Madison Orem, spoke at the Morrow County Commissioner's meeting last week in Heppner. The commissioners listening are left to right Jim Doherty, Melissa Lindsay and Don Russell.

Grace Ogden spoke first and pointed out how farmers and ranchers are leading the way to protect the environment. She said that over the last seventy years even though the use of land, fertilizers, chemicals, and energy have remained mostly the same, U.S. farmers have boosted agricultural output by 270 percent. "This means that farmers and ranchers are increasing their output to feed a projected nine billion people, but they're actually shrinking their carbon footprint," she points out.

Ogden also brought up that cows, which have been getting a bad reputation among global warming activists recently, "actually only represent less than two percent of all greenhouse gas emissions." The cows also increase the soil's capacity to store carbon by stimulating bigger and healthier grass stands that take up more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, she points out.

She said the most recent blow to the agriculture industry was Starbucks' announcement the coffee chain was moving toward a more "environmentally friendly" menu by using alternative milks. Ogden, however, said that plant-based milks come with their own environmental concerns, such as the soybean crops replacing Brazil's forests at a rapid rate. Almond farming methods are also contributing to the loss of bee populations. Plant based alternatives such as soybean, almond and cashews are more commonly grown in locations such as Spain, Ukraine, Canada and Nigeria, and when the plant milk is shipped to the United States the transportation is producing a "huge amount of greenhouse gas emissions."

While she admitted that plant-based milks are a great alternative for people who have health problems, such as being lactose intolerant, or if they simply don't enjoy the taste of cows' milk, she says, "The reality is that cows' milk is one of the most locally sourced ingredients found almost anywhere you go. Every state has a dairy farm, so it doesn't have to be shipped from far away." Ogden quoted Krysta Harden, a spokesman from Dairy Management Inc., who said, "From an environmental and nutrition standpoint, it is not an either/or, both plants and animals play a critical role in the health of the people and the planet."

Ogden also brought up how frugal and innovative farming practices have become. A good example is right here in Morrow County where a large methane digester is operating. "Threemile Canyon Farms outside Boardman is Oregon's largest dairy and built a methane digester in 2012. The digestor processes 80 percent of the manure from their dairy, and (produces) the same amount of energy as three wind turbines," she points out.

The student related how she spoke with both the manager of livestock operations at the farm and the waste management supervisor about the process and was told that the farm is actually building a second digestor. Threemile is the only dairy in Oregon that has their own methane digester on the site. "This is an excellent way to reduce their carbon footprint in a variety of ways," she says. "Not only are they removing methane from the environment, but by having it actually on the farm means they don't have to use a truck to transport it, which would release more greenhouse gas emissions." She said there are tours given to community groups and schools throughout the year and the farm is interested in teaching more people about the environment-saving accomplishment at the dairy.

However, Ogden says, environmental conservation, moderation and preservation aren't always a large-scale effort and can be done through smaller efforts. The use of no-till drills, cover crops, infrared technology and participation in conservation programs are standard procedure in Morrow County and on farms of every size, she says. "I've ridden with my dad on tractors and sprayers with GPS technology, an advancement that has completely changed today's farming practices," adding that before the addition of GPS-enabled equipment, farmers were dealing with large skips throughout a field, and swaths of fields that could be sprayed over several times.

"When my grandpa was a young farmer, he used toilet paper streamers in the field as spray markers. You can imagine how precise that was," she said. Ogden says technological advances in farming save time, money, and most importantly, benefit the environment. "We all need to be conscious of how we impact the environment. Agriculturalists will continue to play an important role in helping the world adapt to and prevent climate change by promoting soil health, conserving water, using nutrients more efficiently, and continuing technological advances. It's a team effort, and one that can only be successful if we can all work together," she concluded.

Mental Health in the Agricultural Industry

On a more personal topic, Madison Orem gave a talk about mental health in the agricultural business and how it is a "big issue that is often ignored."

Orem says many people don't see the stress and fight that farmers are going through. "Mental health in agriculture is a big issue that is often ignored. Many people see producers as resilient people, so the thought of them having mental health issues is hard to see, but it's happening," she emphasized. She said according to the Center for Disease Control suicide rates in agriculture are higher than for any other occu-

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