

Q&A with Phil Hamm

Hermiston station director and plant pathologist talks about the past few decades of ag research

Phil Hamm is a plant pathologist, professor emeritus at Oregon State University and station director of the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center. The East Oregonian recently caught up with Hamm for a Q&A in advance of the 42nd annual Hermiston Farm Fair.

Wait, I thought you said you were going to retire. What gives?

I did retire, sort of, three and a half years on April 1. How fitting, given what has happened since. Actually I relinquished my tenure and began a part-time position with OSU and stayed on as director of HAREC. However, given the financial situation in the state during that time, there were no funds available to replace the plant pathology position I had held over 20 years. So ... I just kept doing what I had been doing. It wasn't because I liked what I did — though that was certainly true. It was about why the position was established in the first place and my commitment to our stakeholders, HAREC and OSU. This position was one of the critical positions at HAREC, like they all are, and without this expertise available to our stakeholders then we just would not be doing our job. Besides, after 40-plus years with OSU, I am truly a believer in what we do and, besides, these folks are my friends. I wouldn't leave without having some way to backfill the pathology position.

In your time as director, how have you seen HAREC change?

So many things have changed in the 10 years I have served as director. I will share with you those changes (the ones I remember), but not before giving the credit where credit is due. These changes couldn't have been done or happen without the tremendous support from our stakeholders and having the best staff anywhere.

OK, where to start? We have or soon will have 15 center-pivot irrigation systems on HAREC. There were only four before I started. The newest one is a variable rate pivot that allows us to control the turning on and off of individual nozzles. Essentially all were gifts. This has provided us with tremendous opportunity to fulfill our mission, to provide new research base information to our stakeholders. We have two new screen-houses that allow us to grow plants in soil as if they are growing in the field, though protected by a screen that either keeps insects in or insects out of the plantings. This has allowed the development of significant new information.

I don't have the time to relay the importance of each new change, so here is the list:

- Hiring a new crop entomologist.
- Hiring a new plant pathologist.
- Hiring a new potato breeder.
- Building a new research lab for the potato breeder.
- Construction of two new greenhouses for the potato breeder.
- Construction of the Don Horneck Memorial Building.
- Construction of a pesticide storage facility that protects the safety of our staff.
- Construction of the 460-kilowatt solar array that saves us about \$30,000 per year.
- The removal of the federal reversionary clause to the title of the land associated with HAREC.
- The soon-to-be-started Precision Irrigated Ag facility belonging to BMCC, but this is a cooperative effort with OSU.
- Remodeling the main office building.



Phil Hamm, at right, is the station director for the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center.

EO file photo

- The addition to the main office building to add four office spaces.
 - Update of irrigation infrastructure.
 - Re-siding most buildings with vinyl siding so that they wouldn't need to be painted.
 - Update of all three residences on HAREC to make them more 'livable.'
 - Construction of a parking garage.
 - Construction of a storage facility for the plant pathology program.
 - Update to technology to allow all pivots to be controlled by a hand-held device.
 - Fiber optic line to provide better Internet service.
 - Wireless and/or hard wire access and phones in all buildings where people work.
 - New farm equipment ... tractors and implements.
- There are likely more, but need to move on to the next question ...

What potential farming breakthrough has you most excited?

Good question. I could discuss the new information coming from the crops entomology program; or the information about fertility that the agronomy program provided; or the opportunity of new potato lines with increased disease resistance, higher yields or higher nutritional value, coming from the work of our biochemist, potato breeder or plant pathologist; or the significant work coming from efforts related to ecosystem services. All are important breakthroughs.

Any unusual superstitions or good luck charms you've seen farmers try?

While I am sure they have some just like the rest of us, what they value most is research information given the amount of money they invest each year. Consider what they go through: At any time, they could lose their entire crop to hail or an early freeze, they could lose their water system in the middle of a heat wave, or the price of what they grow could decline overnight. If I was a grower, I would be on my knees praying every night and have a good bottle of something to help me sleep!

How have local growers stepped up to support the experiment station?

Where do I start? This station is what it is because of two things: we have the best stakeholders that can be found anywhere and we have the best staff. Simple as that. The

stakeholders have done everything to make this station what is today, and it isn't just growers but others in the agricultural sector and beyond. There is hardly a building out here that doesn't have a plaque that recognizes and thanks those who have contributed to make it happen. One could suggest that those in agriculture should support the station ... and they do. But our area is driven by irrigated agriculture. Simple as that, and for that reason there likely isn't a business in the region that isn't tied to agriculture in some way.

Enough of the soap box — we have new buildings, pivots, office space, office remodels, equipment, infrastructure updates, cash to support our base budget, folks who loan us equipment and operators. The list goes on and on. I know OSU believes they own this facility, but in reality the growers have shown their ownership is so many ways over the years. Well, it is humbling. I have literally made a call or two in

the past when I needed to replace a pump and had the amount given as easy as that. We are talking thousands of dollars. Since I have been the director of this station, I am certain that at least \$1 million has been contributed and none of that for research support. Research funding was in addition. I can't stress enough the size of or importance of the partnership we at HAREC have with stakeholders of all kinds (whether they grow something or not). The people we work with are truly the most giving, supportive and nicest people you could find anywhere. Why would anyone want to leave that kind of situation. It goes back to why I haven't fully retired.

What's the strangest thing you've ever seen used for fertilizer?

Not sure if it qualifies as a fertilizer or not, but when we had some hail damage back in the '90s at least one grower applied molasses to the plants to help them recover. No reason to suspect that would help, but when you are looking at nearly a complete loss, one might try just about anything, like in this case.

What's something grown locally you think might surprise you?

How about a list? In the Columbia Basin the following are grown commercially ... how many were you aware of: artichoke, adzuki bean, black eyed peas, celery, chestnuts, edamame, okra, peanut, spearmint, or things I've never heard of such as aprium, arugula, bok choy, burdock and celeraic.

How big was the biggest watermelon you've ever seen?

It isn't about big, but about quality. Remember, it is accurate to say that we grow the best (sweetest) watermelons than anywhere else — anywhere — due to our area having all the right environmental, water and soil conditions. California or Arizona or anywhere else for that matter have nothing over us. We have it over them. That is true for a lot of other crops as well.

Why should people — not just farmers — attend the Farm Fair?

There is a lot to be learned, and lots of fellowship with fellow folks who live in the region. Plus, the added bonus of free food!

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