

Expo showcases farm tech

Future Farm Expo scheduled for Aug. 15-17

By **GEORGE PLAGEN**
STAFF WRITER

Imagine putting on a pair of virtual reality goggles and being able to control a robot that mimics human movements to prune clusters of premium wine grapes.

Sounds futuristic, but the Remote Operated Vineyard Robot, or ROVR, may become an integral tool for U.S. winegrowers sooner rather than later.

Engineers at Digital Harvest, a Virginia-based company specializing in precision agriculture, have spent the last 18 months working to build the ROVR system, which will be on full display during the 2017 Future Farm Expo coming Aug. 15-17 at the Pendleton Convention Center.

The Future Farm Expo is a three-day summit and trade show that invites local agriculture professionals — including growers, consultants and food processors — to meet with high-tech developers and learn how they can use drones and droids to make their operations run more efficiently.

This year's expo will feature drones capable of flying beyond the pilot's line of sight, mobile farming apps, advances in irrigation technology and, yes, a live demonstration of ROVR, which was built from scratch at Digital Harvest's research outpost at the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range.

The ROVR has already been tested in vineyards around Echo, seeking to overcome a chronic shortage of manual labor in the wine industry. Using the virtual reality platform, skilled workers can essentially take command of the



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY ROBERT DELAHANTY

The Remote Operated Vineyard Robot, or ROVR, will be on display during the 2017 Future Farm Expo in Pendleton.

robot from anywhere in the world — a Chinese office building, for example — potentially opening a global workforce.

Young Kim, CEO of Digital Harvest, said the company tried a number of different tools to operate the ROVR, such as joy sticks and game controllers. However, none were able to duplicate the same level of speed and accuracy from workers in the field.

“By using virtual reality as an operator interface, we not only improved manual dexterity but also opened up the possibility of human workers being able to teleport to work from anywhere,” Kim said in a statement.

The ROVR will be fitted with remote sensors to provide real-time crop data, such as the size of grape clusters and estimated yield, and moves via driverless golf cart, which was donated to the project by Yamaha Unmanned Systems.

Like Digital Harvest, Yamaha has set up shop at the Pendleton UAS Range, where they help to form the backbone of the Oregon UAS Future Farm program.

Jeff Lorton, Future Farm manager, said adopting automated technology is key for agriculture moving forward. Future Farm exists to help bridge the connection between Silicon Valley-types working to make those machines a reality, and farmers who can best explain the issues they face.

“The idea is to bring the people who can develop these solutions here, and give them the benefit of agricultural wisdom in the Columbia Basin,” Lorton said.

For three days, the Future Farm Expo helps to facilitate a meeting of those minds.

“The whole goal is to bring these two groups of people together and create an environment where they can learn from each other and form personal relationships,” Lorton said.

Lorton, who also serves as creative director for the Duke Joseph advertising agency in downtown Pendleton, said this year's Future Farm Expo has assembled perhaps the greatest ever panel of farm automation experts. The event's keynote speaker is George Kellerman, a founding

member of Yamaha Motor Ventures & Laboratory, whose presentation is titled, “How robotics and automation will save farming in the 21st century.”

In order for agriculture to thrive, Lorton said farmers need to be forward-thinking.

“Nationally, we are bleeding off (individual) farm owners every year,” he said. “We have to turn to technology.”

The final day of the Future Farm Expo will also feature a “pancake summit,” where participants can learn more about joining Future Farm and accelerating the development of farm technologies. Lorton said he hopes to see their industries run with the program.

Registration for the Future Farm Expo can be done online at www.futurefarm-expo.tech. The cost is \$125 for all three days, though participants can save 25 percent by using the promotional code “earlybird.”

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Wind farm changing hands

Wheatridge rights sold to Florida company

By **GEORGE PLAGEN**
STAFF WRITER

On the brink of construction, a 292-turbine wind farm slated for Umatilla and Morrow counties is changing hands.

NextEra Energy, based in Juno Beach, Florida, has purchased the development rights for the Wheatridge Wind Energy Facility and is now working to transfer the project's site certificate through the Oregon Department of Energy.

Wheatridge was pioneered by Ione farmer Jerry Rietmann before the facility sold to NextEra in April, according to documents. One month later, the Energy Facility Siting Council issued its site certificate for the wind farm, giving developers the go-ahead to start building.

A request to transfer the certificate from Swagart Wind Power LLC to NextEra Energy was filed June 14. But first, an informational hearing will be held before the council Thursday, July 27, at the Best Western Plus Inn in Hood River.

Rietmann did not return calls for comment. A spokesman for NextEra Energy released a statement saying the project “will create tremendous economic opportunities for the region as well as bring more low-cost, emission-free energy to Oregon.”

Once completed, Wheatridge will gener-

ate up to 500 megawatts of energy. The turbines are designed to be built over two main areas — Wheatridge West, located entirely within Morrow County about seven miles northwest of Heppner, and Wheatridge East, about 16 miles northeast of Heppner and crossing into Umatilla County. The two areas will be 25 miles apart, connected via 230-kilovolt overhead power lines.

Transmission onto the electricity grid was not addressed in the project's application, as developers had intended for a third party to own and construct those lines separately. The hope was that by establishing a single designated transmission corridor, multiple projects including Wheatridge could link up on a single set of lines without having a spiderweb of lines crisscross the landscape. There was particular concern multiple transmission systems could interrupt farming and take high-value land out of production.

NextEra says it is currently working on solutions to connect onto the power grid, and evaluating its options for selling the power generated by Wheatridge.

As of 2016, NextEra and its subsidiaries had a consolidated revenue of \$16.2 billion and 45,900 megawatts of generating capacity. NextEra Energy Resources bills itself as the world's largest generator of renewable energy from the wind and sun.

Contact George Plaven at gplaven@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0825.

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