

Leadership class tours agriculture facilities

By **JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN**
STAFF WRITER

Although I stifle the fact like many bury family secrets, I was born and raised in a city kid. Worse, actually — a suburbanite. I've spent and loved the last three years in rural Oregon, but still approach parts of rural life with the eyes of an outsider.



Jayati Ramakrishnan

That was never clearer than last Tuesday, when I went with my Leadership Hermiston class to its first themed session of the year, "Ag Day." Our class went to five places in the region, all of which make some contribution to the agricultural industry.

We heard from Craig Reeder, VP of Hale Companies. Phil Hamm found time in between making cracks about my Oregon Ducks sweatshirt to talk about the work at the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension

Center. At Dow-DuPont (formerly DuPont-Pioneer) we learned about the hybridization of corn seeds, which are shipped to testing teams across the U.S. At Madison Ranches in Echo, we got bits of Aaron Madison's encyclopedic knowledge about farming, from how fields are irrigated to ways technology has made farming more efficient.

At Shearer's Foods (a new stop for the class this year), we learned about the production and packaging sides of making potato, kettle and tortilla chips. I overstayed my welcome at the chip sampling station, but also learned about the distribution of those products, some to major chains around the region.

We ended the day at Bellinger's, where we learned that the storefront many of us had already visited was one component of a hun-

dreds-acre farm that grows more than just the signature watermelons.

It was an educational day for me, partly because it revealed how much I didn't know. Growing up in the suburbs, you don't see a farm every day, and when you do, it's superficial enough to get the idea that farming is unskilled labor, or that anybody can do it. I suppose once I moved here, I sort of realized that's not true, but it didn't really register until Tuesday. As Craig Reeder spoke, my head spun trying to keep up with his all-encompassing knowledge of the Columbia Basin water system. When Aaron Madison started talking about soil nutrient analysis, I already knew I'd be looking that one up at home.

What's clear to me, and what should be clear to any-

one who's not in agriculture, is how much planning, work and institutional knowledge goes into farming, as well as a need to be flexible for the changing world they're feeding.

It challenged my idea of local food.

"Raw product and a 20 minute drive," Reeder told us, describing how all of the steps in the supply chain can be completed in the region, and how much money is generated from those steps. Though it may not say so on the packaging, there's a good chance if you're eating a potato product, or corn, or onion, it is, in fact, from around here.

I'm not gushing. I've still got plenty of questions. There's quite a lot of food waste, something I noticed at several places we went — and I would have liked

to hear more about how it's handled, or how to reduce it.

"What about GMOs?" Shane Clayson of DuPont dared us to ask, a glint in his eye. He wasn't the only one. Reeder talked about the different ways to handle a problem in agriculture, using weeds as an example. You can pull it out, but that requires labor. Spray it, but then you're using chemicals. You can learn to live with it but your yield will suffer.

"GMOs are another potential tool," he said. "You as a consumer have to decide between those things."

The Portlander in me still isn't fully convinced, but I am convinced that Phil Hamm was (cringe) right. It's worth caring about, and it's important to understand. Whoever you are, whether directly or indirectly, agriculture affects us all.

Ag Day tidbits

- Dow-DuPont grows and hybridizes rice, sorghum, alfalfa and cotton, but only corn, soybeans and wheat are grown in Hermiston.
- In addition to watermelons, Bellinger's grows several crops including alfalfa, wheat, cantaloupe, tomatoes and pumpkins.
- Shearer's Foods' customers include Kroger, Win Co, and Food Should Taste Good.
- Madison Ranches is home to 18 wind turbines, which generate about 34 megawatts.
- Hermiston Agriculture Research and Extension Center is one of 12 agricultural experiment stations in the state, but every county has an extension office.

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