

FARM

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testify in front of the Ways and Means committee, and I realized, they're not my stakeholders. They're my friends."

Hamm retired from research about seven years ago, but since then has been at the experiment station part-time as an administrator.

Hamm said the position at the experiment station was brand new when he arrived in 1980 — he applied for it after several years as a research assistant in forest pathology at OSU. During that time he'd also gotten a graduate degree in plant pathology.

When he applied for the position in Hermiston, Hamm said that role hadn't existed at the station before, but some local growers had gone to the state legislature and got the position secured.

Though most of his research has focused on potatoes, Hamm said the diversity of crops in the Columbia Basin has lent variety to his research, as well.

"We worked on lots of diseases with other crops — lima beans, onions, carrots, corn," he said.

His colleagues noted his knack for developing relationships with both growers and other researchers.

"Extension means communication," said Silvia Rondon, an OSU professor and extension entomologist. "I've seen very few people



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY

Phil Hamm, director of the Hermiston Agricultural Research & Extension Center, chats with another participant on Nov. 28 at the Hermiston Farm Fair. Hamm announced he will retire this summer.

within the extension service who can convey information like him."

Ken Frost, an assistant professor of plant pathology, said Hamm's support for researchers has been a help to all staff.

"He's worked really hard to promote OSU extension, and also help out growers," he said. "He's done a lot to foster the relationships with growers in the region."

Hamm said those relationships took time and effort.

"When I first came here, I was the new guy — people didn't know about me, I didn't know about them."

So he began going to visit growers and look for issues with potatoes, as well as other crops. He began recognizing issues that some of the growers didn't recognize they had.

"They just lived with them," he said.

Once he started visiting

farms and developing those relationships — plus showing what the research station could offer — he said the calls came in quickly.

Over the years, he and his team have worked with growers around the region, researching diseases in potatoes and other crops in the area.

He added that his role is not to "think out loud."

"My role is not to give out ideas. My role is to give out research-based information," he said.

There were solutions that have remained elusive — dealing with ergot, a fungal disease in grass seed, is a problem Hamm said is still largely unsolved — but he said he felt good about the progress he and his team made on several problems with potatoes and other crops.

"We've provided new information to growers about how they could use (our

research) to reduce and completely manage diseases," he said.

Though he's been a staple at the experiment station for nearly 30 years, many community members might recognize Hamm from other areas.

He's a board member for several community organizations, like the Blue Mountain Community College Foundation and the Umatilla Electric Cooperative.

"I've still got lots of things to keep me busy," he said.

He plans to stay in Hermiston, where he will continue to serve with local groups, as well as hunt and fish in his free time.

"Maybe more importantly than anything, I have grandkids that live right next to me," he said. "If they're not moving, I'm not moving."

Hamm said that while he won't be working in the industry, he looks forward to continued growth and change in local agriculture.

"We have over 204 different crop types in the Columbia Basin," he said. "That's going to continue to change as growers look for things that provide them a greater return on investment."

He said he expects to see major changes as hemp becomes more widely grown.

"It's still a federally regulated material, but that's going to change," he said.

"We'll always be a potato area, but hemp might turn out to be a huge new opportunity with huge potential returns."

LIGHTS

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have torn up the driveway.

"Since it started life as a Christmas tree, if it needed to be taken out anyway, we thought it would be nice to end its life as a Christmas tree," he said.

Barron said his mother has passed away since planting the tree all those years ago, but she was a longtime Hermiston resident and would have been proud to see the tree giving enjoyment to so many people in the community.

"It will be nice to see it decorated as a Christmas tree again," he said.

Thursday's tree-lighting ceremony will begin with live entertainment by the Hermiston High School jazz choir and jazz band at about 5:30 p.m. on Northeast Second Street between Main Street and Gladys Avenue.

Opening remarks and the arrival of Santa Claus will begin at 6 p.m., and the tree will be lit at about 6:15 p.m. Everyone is invited to stay after and get pictures with Santa, ride in a horse-drawn buggy, enjoy concessions and shop First Thursday deals at downtown merchants who are extending their hours to 7 p.m. or later. Gems Cheer will also perform at 7 p.m.

Parks and recreation director Larry Fetter said there will be heaters and portable fire pits set up around the festival street

and Santa will be in a more spacious location this year on the north side of the tree.

"It will be quite festive," he said.

Fetter said the tree will be decked out in new, brighter lights this year. The street will also look more polished as this is the first Christmas since the city completed the festival street this summer.

"It's the first time using the festival street now that it's had the makeover, and I can already tell you the electricity situation is way better," he said.

After the celebration Thursday, a light show with music will be available at 5 p.m., 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. Monday through Friday until Christmas. Fetter said there will be three songs the first week and a new song will be added each week.

The festival street will be the site of another celebration on New Year's Eve. Some details are still being worked out, but the city will host a New Year's Eve bash on Dec. 31 from 9 p.m. to midnight with fireworks and entertainment by classic rock and pop band The Shades.

The city is also hosting Pancakes with Santa on Dec. 22 from 9-11:30 a.m. at the Hermiston Community Center. Seating is limited and tickets (\$8 for children ages 2-15, \$10 for ages 16 and older or \$30 for a family of four) will be sold at the community center until Dec. 19.

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