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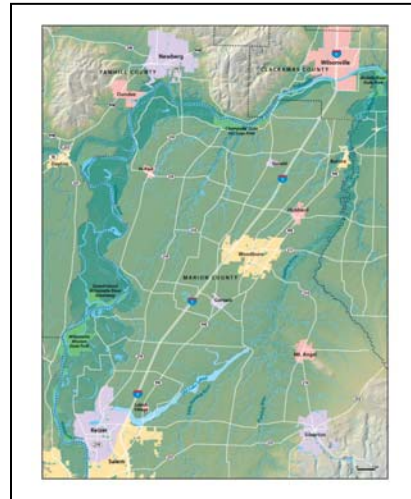
Friends of French Prairie branches out with a new branding campaign

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By Josh Kulla

French Prairie is on the front line of the Portland metro area's ongoing debate over rural and urban land reserves.

Over the years, grass roots organization Friends of French Prairie has led the opposition to urban development south of the Willamette River in rural Marion County.

Now, the group, led by president Ben Williams, is expanding its reach with the introduction of a new branding program aimed at touting the area's agricultural riches.



Dubbed the French Prairie Branding Initiative, Williams envisions the effort bringing together local farms, nurseries and retailers under the French Prairie banner. If it works, he says, the name will become synonymous with quality produce, flowers and nursery products.

"We started over three years ago, principally as a land use organization, because there is so much development pressure on various parts of French Prairie," Williams said. "It's Oregon's historic breadbasket, it's where the state was founded. It's the richest soil, not just in the state, but in the world. There's all this agricultural heritage."

Changing the public's perception of his group also is important, he added.

"Having spent a couple of years doing that as an organization, we realized you can only be an active populace with pitchforks shouting 'no' for so long. You need at least as much positive contribution to the subject as you have negative opposition. So, we needed to find the best way to move forward."

As Williams suggests, French Prairie is located on some of the Willamette Valley's finest farmland. The area's farmers and nurseries produce a veritable smorgasbord of fruits, hops, vegetables, nursery stock, grass seed and other sustainable, local products.

The name French Prairie dates back to the 1820s, and now is used to describe the area of the Willamette Valley bounded on the west and north by the Willamette River, on the east by Canby and the Molalla River, and extending south toward Keizer. It includes Champoeg State Park and historic district, as well as the towns of Aurora, Donald, Butteville, Gervais, Hubbard, St. Louis, St. Paul and Woodburn. It also includes a small slice of Clackamas County that includes the Charbonneau development.

At least 13 farms and nurseries have signed up to the idea to date, as well as retail outlets Wilsonville Lamb's Thriftway and Fir Point Farms in Aurora.

For Dan Sands, produce manager at the Wilsonville Lamb's Thriftway, the branding initiative makes perfect sense for the family-owned Lamb's chain.

"We really embrace the living local idea," Sands said. "We've done this for a long, long time."

Lamb's already has working partnerships with over a dozen local farms to supply the chain with fresh produce. Already, signs with the names of local farms supplying the supermarket adorn the produce section, while a display case features French Prairie produce. Right now, leafy greens, including lettuce, are the staple of the day.

"It's right in our back yard," he said. "It's dealing with your neighbors and you see how things are going."

Sands said he still has concerns over how the French Prairie name will be marketed and protected from outside misuse. But he remains enthusiastic.

"We've got to feel this out and coordinate everyone," he said. "But really, the product tends to speak for itself."

The initiative consists formally of three parts: French Prairie Fresh, French Prairie Grown and French Prairie Organic. The first covers locally-grown fruits and vegetables, the second identifies non-food products and the last singles out products certified as organic by Oregon Tilth or the Stellar Certification Service.

"You don't need to buy lettuce from California and you don't need to buy pork from Nebraska," Williams said. "You can get all these things from local suppliers."

Sands agrees. He added that he hopes the initiative helps build a strong agricultural community throughout the area.

"It will increase what we're doing," he said. "It gives us a baseline for building relationships. I think it'll continue to grow as people recognize the quality in the store. They'll go, 'Hey, I recognize that name.'"