

Oregon ag an economic powerhouse, report finds

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Oregon's urban growth boundaries stop cities from sprawling onto farmland, and result in stark transitions from houses to fields.

Agriculture is Oregon's second-largest industry, and one in eight Oregonians work on farms or ranches or in businesses linked to them. The processing, shipping and distribution plants, joined by equipment dealers, supply stores, restaurants and food service companies, churn \$5.48 billion worth of farm and ranch products into \$22 billion in goods and services annually. That's 15 percent of Oregon's economic activity.

Those statistics and others are compiled in a new report from the land-use advocacy group 1000 Friends of Oregon, which hopes legislators and policy makers will recognize the economic impact of what it calls the state's "agri-cluster."

"We want them to connect the dots," said Steve McCoy, farm and forest staff attorney with the Portland-based group.

The report, written by intern Arturo Romo and titled, "Great & Growing: People and Jobs in Oregon's Agri-Cluster," assembles data to make the case that Oregon agriculture is an economic powerhouse in every corner of the state.

Jobs and products associated with Oregon ag are surprisingly stable, and can't be easily outsourced. In the depths of the 2007-2012 recession, when the state's total

employment dropped 5.3 percent and other kinds of manufacturing jobs declined 15.8 percent, food processing jobs in Oregon increased 7.8 percent, according to the report.

Eighty percent of what Oregon grows leaves the state, and half of that goes overseas. Compared to Midwest competitors, Oregon farmers stand at the doorstep of Asia's vibrant economies, and engage in brisk trade with China, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Indonesia. One Willamette Valley potato grower has been on three trade missions to Vietnam in the past two years.

Oregon's crop diversity cushions economic downturns, according to the report. A bad corn market might devastate Iowa, where 45 percent of its farm acreage is planted to corn. But Oregon produces 220 crops and leads the nation in production of 14, ranging from blackberries to Christmas trees and hazelnuts to carrot seed.

Farming's just a rural concern? Hardly. Five of the top 10 agricultural counties are considered "urban" by the U.S. Census. Marion County, home of the state capital, Salem, is first in Oregon ag sales. Clackamas County, just outside Portland, is fifth. Washington County, also a Portland neighbor and better known for Intel, Nike and high-tech, is seventh. By volume, farm products make up 60 percent of the goods shipped from the Port of Portland.

McCoy, the 1000 Friends of Oregon staff attorney, says agriculture's economic impact is often overlooked. And in the group's view, it is Oregon's land-use laws — originally enacted to prevent cities from sprawling onto farmland — that make agriculture's success possible.

"It's important to point that out from time to time," McCoy said. "The reason we have an agricultural economy is because of SB 100 (Senate Bill 100, the 1973 law that required statewide planning)."

The report concludes there is work to be done to keep farming viable. The state must continue to shelter farmland from develop, support a new generation of farmers and improve its water and transportation infrastructure in order for agriculture to thrive.