

OREGON AT A CROSSROADS

Saving French Prairie

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I'd like to ask all Oregonians, but especially those that live in and around metro Portland and in the Willamette Valley two questions:

- 1) What is French Prairie?
- 2) Why does saving it matter?

The answers go to the soul of Oregon – who we are as Oregonians, why did we come here and who can we best be in the future? Understanding the history of the ‘Eden at the end of the Oregon Trail’ is critically relevant to all Oregonians today.

Dr. David Brauner, Professor of Archaeology at OSU answers the question this way: “French Prairie is possibly the most historic piece of real estate in the entire West, certainly in the Pacific Northwest, and it must be protected.” The area in question is the broad expanse of fertile farm land that lies between the Willamette River on the north and Lake Labish (near Keizer) on the south, and between the Willamette on the west and the Pudding River on the east.

This is where the first non-native inhabitants of Oregon (French-Canadian fur trappers) settled and married Native Americans, and where the earliest white settlers from the East settled. This is also where Oregon self-government was established, placing our feet on the path to Statehood.

So as the earliest Oregon Pioneers would say: “This is the place, the land of milk and honey, the green Eden at the end of the hard, lonesome trail. The idea of living in a land naturally rich, which is the home of independent, free thinking people who believe in self-government and are willing to sacrifice to be worthy of this beautiful, special place.” We self-selected to come here for these reasons. Let California and Seattle be the places of sprawl and unrestrained commerce in land. Let us be Oregonians, committed to stewardship and the protection of this place we are proud to call home.

While Brauner’s emphasis is on the social history of the area, it ties to today’s practical concern, because this history has to do with agriculture. A clue to the significance of this subject comes from taking a look at the satellite photo of the Northwest on the cover The Atlas of Oregon and noticing just how little of the state is actually high quality agricultural land. It is precious little, and almost all in the Willamette Valley. It is precious, scarce and should be preserved for reasons of our survival alone.

French Prairie is at the north end of the Willamette Valley, directly in the development path south from Portland, and possesses some of the most fertile soils in the world. This land was used agriculturally by Native Americans for centuries before white settlers arrived. Since then it has been inhabited, it has been an exceptionally productive agriculture region, producing fruit and vegetable crops, seed and nursery stock—all of which add up to Oregon’s second largest

industry, which includes \$1 billion in exports per year, making it one of Oregon's traded sector bright spots.

Everyone is aware of the worsening economy, unease which has now trumped the war in Iraq as American's number one concern. And rightly so: gas prices in Oregon now average \$3.49 per gallon; wheat is up over 100% in the past year; flour is up 173% in the last year, milk is up 33% year on year, electricity is up 11.5% (Oregonians Feel Squeeze; *The Oregonian*, April 16, 2008). Providing local food is healthy, environmentally sound and provides much needed agricultural employment at a time we need it most.

Last week we read and saw long haul truckers on the east coast stopped driving to protest fuel prices. The point is that all of these things are tied together, and unlike the 1970s when OPEC's embargo temporarily spiked oil prices, today we're in an entirely different global circumstance characterized by a shortage of established production sources), declining outputs in the Middle East, increasing demand in the developing world, and substantial geo-political unrest affecting oil prices.

These are directly translating into increased food costs. Gasoline is only one byproduct of oil refining, besides plastics, fertilizer, pharmaceuticals and fabrics. Our country's food production practices are based on intensive monoculture in limited locales with a high usage of fertilizer and pesticides. Increasing oil prices drive up the cost of fertilizer, pesticides and diesel for tractors. Then this cost factor is further compounded by long haul trucking of our food from where it is grown to where we live. A hedge against this continuing economic dislocation is that we can and are growing local food, fuel and creating carbon offsets which are a critically important balance, and an important assurance in a time of uncertainty.

The point of all this was touched on OPB's program *Think Out Loud*, (Thursday, April 17) which was about farmer's markets. What characterizes farmer's markets is that they sell locally grown foods, but that still only represent a small percentage of all the food we eat (i.e. only 2% of the food eaten in Benton county was grown in Benton County!). The big question asked was "what would it take to get to the point where most of our food is locally grown?"

The answer is that it would take a lot: economics, changes in buying habits (local varieties instead of California exotics), changes in growing choices (vegetables instead of rye seed), changes in lifestyle (no mangoes in December), etc. It would also take saving farmland. You can't grow food locally if you've turned your farmland into industrial parks and housing developments.

We have an unparalleled agricultural resource close to most of our homes and markets. Will we kill this unique resource so that a few land speculators and commercial developers can profit by "flipping" farm land for personal gain? Will this be the generation which trades our precious green landscape for the thoughtless development that Tom McCall warned us about a generation ago?

We are again at the critical fork in the road. One leads to the Californization of Oregon, the other traces the steps of earlier generations of Oregonians who view stewardship of this great green landscape as a birthright and a responsibility to generations of Oregonians yet unborn.

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