

Plowing a middle ground on farms

Agriculture and development interests square off as the metro area and the state consider major land-use revisions

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Just as Oregon wrestles with population growth and retaining the look of the countryside, agricultural advocates are citing an eye-opening state crop report as evidence that farming is successful, sustainable and should be protected from sprawling development.

But industrial, housing and commercial developers say the additional million Oregonians expected to arrive in the next 30 years need homes, jobs and the roads, pipes and wires of a supporting social grid. They won't stand for blanket preservation of all farmland.

The middle ground is unknown territory. But it's likely to emerge in the coming year as all sides engage on a pair of public policy issues:

First, Metro and Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties are working to designate urban and rural reserves, which could set growth patterns for the next 50 years. The work will be finished by next fall.

Second, the "Big Look" land-use task force, appointed by the governor and Legislature, has recommended statewide changes that could result in the rezoning and development of rural areas now reserved for farming and forestry. The proposals will be taken up by the Legislature in January.

The choices will determine where Oregonians will live and work, how they will travel and how they access water, food, energy, schools, parks, medical care and shopping. The choices will reveal what Oregonians mean when they talk about a sustainable state.

However things take shape, it's clear that farming is a serious player. The state's Department of Agriculture shows Oregon in 2007 was the nation's top producer of a dozen specialty crops, ranging from hazelnuts and blackberries to potted azaleas and Christmas trees.

Oregon ranked second or third nationally in a dozen more commodities, including hops, peppermint and mink pelts. Farm operations add up to a \$5-billion-per-year industry, making it one of the state's enduring economic engines.

Predictably, farming advocates, joined by a key conservation group, say the crop statistics point out the importance of preserving farmland as Oregon grows.

"If it wasn't for the land-use program, a lot of these numbers would be different," said Jim Johnson, the outspoken land-use and water planning coordinator with the agriculture department.

Much of the state's best farmland, especially in western Oregon along the I-5 corridor, is potentially threatened by urban growth, Johnson said.

Land isn't the only consideration, he said. The availability of water, especially as growing cities and industries demand more, is an emerging issue for agriculture. So are connectivity and transportation: Just like any other industry, farmers need access to supporting services, supplies and markets, and protection from new neighbors who object to dust, machinery noise and long operating hours.

"A lot of these things could not operate next to a lot of development," Johnson said.

But Oregon's development interests assert their stake in how land is used.

"That's at the very heart of the discussion going on right now between Metro and the three counties," said Kelly Ross, executive director of the Oregon chapter of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, an advocacy group. "The main motivation for both sides --development and agriculture --is that there has to be a better way to strike a balance.

"This process forces everyone to look at the agricultural economy and the urban economy and try to take a more sophisticated approach to the factors crucial to each of those, and to come up with what is probably a very delicate balance."

In making that statement, Ross refers to the urban and rural reserves program, which would determine where the urban growth boundary encircling the Portland metro area will be expanded over the next 40 to 50 years. Officials say designating land now for farms and for future development could stabilize agricultural and natural areas while making growth more predictable.

Metro and the three counties would be the first in Oregon to designate urban and rural reserves. The four partners must unanimously agree on the designations, which are scheduled to be completed next fall. The planning area involves 400,000 acres in the three counties.

Farm groups are leery. Small to mid-sized producers --those who sell at Portland's farmers markets, to local restaurants or to contract customers --worry they'll be pushed out by expansion of urban centers. Despite being the most urbanized region of Oregon, the three counties have thriving agricultural bases.

Clackamas County ranks second in the state in farm production value, Washington County is fourth and even Multnomah County is 14th.

Industrial and office space developer Greg Specht, a member of the Urban and Rural Reserves Steering Committee, said the angst is unwarranted. The planning area amounts to a five-mile donut outside the current urban growth boundary, he said.

Farmers whose land is designated for urban use would be able to sell their property for a "pickup load of cash" and move elsewhere, while those in rural reserve areas could continue farming, he said. Change isn't likely for decades to come, Specht added.

Meanwhile, the conservation group 1000 Friends of Oregon cites the crop report as reason to reject the "misguided" recommendations of the Big Look task force, which will be considered by the 2009 Legislature.

The task force proposal to allow regional control of land-use decisions "opens the door to massive re-zoning of Oregon's farm and forest lands" that will "pull the rug out from under Oregon agriculture," the group said in an e-mail news release.

The report shows agriculture is a sustainable sector of the state's economy, providing jobs that can't be outsourced, 1000 Friends said.

"Now more than ever, our land-use planning program should protect Oregon agriculture," the group said.

Other groups bring a different perspective.

"It's problematic," said John Ledger, spokesman for Associated Oregon Industries. "I think with land use, planning and zoning, there's always some tension there."