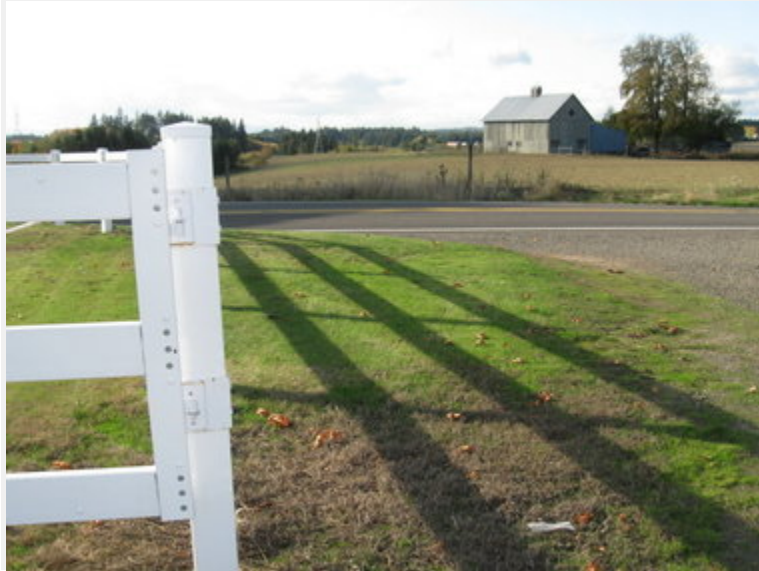


New report says Oregon's farmland is valuable for more than what grows on it

Thursday, December 29, 2011

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Dana Tims/The Oregonian A new study says the value of Oregon's farmland extends beyond crops to ecological and social benefits.

Farming's direct economic impact in Oregon adds up to 10 percent of the state's sales, 12 percent of jobs and 7 percent of its value-added activity, according to a **new report by the state Department of Agriculture**.

Add the sales, services and professions that sprout from farming -- everything from fertilizer purchases and tractor repair to land-use lawyers -- and the impact is even greater. But dollar signs don't tell the full value of the 16 million acres devoted to farming and ranching in Oregon, according to department economist and policy analyst Brent Searle.

He maintains farmland provides ecological and even social benefits as well.

In addition to growing food and fiber and supporting livestock, farmland filters water, shelters wildlife, stores carbon dioxide, gives tourists something to look at and provides residents a sense of open space, Searle says in the report.

In addition, the state's farmland is adaptive, renewable, sustainable, efficient and primarily family-owned and operated. For those reasons, Searle concludes, it's crucial to avoid

converting farmland to housing, industry, shopping or other business use.

Farmland is under constant development pressure, he says. Development may provide short-term value spikes, but over time "it is questionable whether these other uses will equal the perpetual benefits of agricultural productivity," Searle says, "especially when accounting for amenities that accrue beyond simple economic gains."

Searle singles out **Washington County** as a place "often at the heart of the debate about land use and additional agricultural lands being brought into the urban growth boundary."

Although known as Oregon's high-tech center and home to firms such as Intel, Washington County also ranks among the state's top five agricultural counties. The **2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture**, the most recent year available, showed the county had gross farm sales of \$311 million and an estimated economic impact, through associated jobs and services, of \$1.9 billion.

However, the county had about 140 fewer farmers than it did in the 2002 ag census, and had lost 2,700 acres of farmland in the five-year census period.

To preserve farmland, Oregon's cities should increase urban densities by building up instead of out, Searle says. New development should be placed on poor soil or onto infill sites. Utilities, parks and golf courses should be built away from high-value farmland. Gravel should be produced in quarries, not mined by stripping farmland, Searle maintains.

With the world population projected to reach 9 billion in 30 to 40 years, food production capacity becomes a national security issue, he says, adding, "The resources devoted to agriculture and food are national treasures that require preservation."

Citing other studies, the report says developed land requires 6.3 times more in public tax dollars to maintain than if the land remained in agricultural use. Subdivisions and other development require streets, sewer and water systems, police and fire protection and parks, the report says.

Among the other highlights:

-- More than 98 percent of Oregon farms are family owned, and more than 1,100 have been worked by the same family for more than a century, surpassing all other industries for sustained operation.

-- About 80 percent of Oregon's agricultural products are shipped out of state, bringing "new money" into the economy.

-- The Willamette Valley's acclaimed wine grapes grow primarily on hillsides once thought to be good for nothing but grazing sheep -- an example of crop and commodity adaptation in response to climate, technology, market swings and consumer demand.

-- From 1960 to 2004, Oregon farmers increased productivity at a rate faster than any other state.

The report is titled, "A Comprehensive Valuation of Agricultural Lands: A Perpetual Investment in Oregon's Economy and Environment."