

A success story worth protecting

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Sauvie Island cabbage field.

Buried amid the daily stories of national economic calamity, failing financial institutions and a plunging stock market is some genuinely positive economic news, a success story here in our own backyard.

According to recent figures from the Oregon Department of Agriculture, net farm income in Oregon totaled \$1.48 billion in 2007. This record amount is a 50 percent increase from 2006. And experts predict that 2008 will set a new record.

Oregon agriculture is remarkably diverse, with more than 225 different products marketed locally and around the world. Agriculture is the No. 2 industry in Oregon and accounts -- directly or indirectly -- for one out of every 10 Oregon jobs.

Given this ray of sunshine during dark economic times, it's puzzling why anyone would put the Oregon agriculture success story at risk.

But that is exactly what Oregon's Big Look Task Force is doing. The task force was created to evaluate Oregon's land-use planning program and recommend improvements to the 2009 Legislature. The task force just completed a series of public meetings around the state that gave Oregonians an opportunity to weigh in.

Among the issues the group is looking at, the most controversial proposal would give local governments greater power to develop rural resource lands without existing current statewide protections. Opening up these lands to developers would result in loss of farmland, increased sprawl in rural areas and conflicts with farmers and ranchers for scarce water supplies.

Land-use battles are, of course, nothing new here in Oregon. What is new is how agriculture's success has changed the focus of rural land investments.

The cover story in the September issue of Oregon Business magazine ("The Return of King Ag") provides that new perspective:

"The value of agricultural land has increased and the biggest reason for that is the commodity prices,' says Deb Sue Hamby, a Pendleton-based loan officer with the Northwest Farm Credit Services bank. 'There have been a lot of outside investor buyers that have been coming into the area buying up land.'

"Of course, outside investors have been trying to get their hands on Oregon agricultural properties for years. The difference is, now the speculative goal is not to build subdivisions or golf courses, but to keep it farmland, because with prices soaring, farming is where the money's at."

A recent study done for the Big Look Task Force by Oregon State University's Institute for Natural Resources found "an overall consensus that Oregon's land-use program has been effective in preserving the agricultural land base."

The task force is asking the wrong questions. Instead of offering proposals to open up more rural land for development, it should be initiating proposals to increase economic stability in rural communities, including infrastructure improvements for the agricultural economy.

Oregon agriculture is doing well. Our land-use planning system has played a key role in helping Oregon farmers prosper. This is no time to weaken land-use planning and put Oregon agriculture -- and Oregon's economy -- in jeopardy.

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