

RELATIONSHIP OF OREGON'S POPULATION GROWTH TO PRIME FARMLAND

In an August 22, [article](#) on the Oregon Employment Department's web page, Jessica Nelson detailed Oregon's population growth both in 2021 by Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) as well as the 2010 to 2021 overall population growth. The 2021 data looked at the eight MSA's in Oregon (Albany and Grants Pass were added to the MSA list in 2013), and pointed out that the Bend-Redmond MSA had the highest growth rate for the period, but of note:

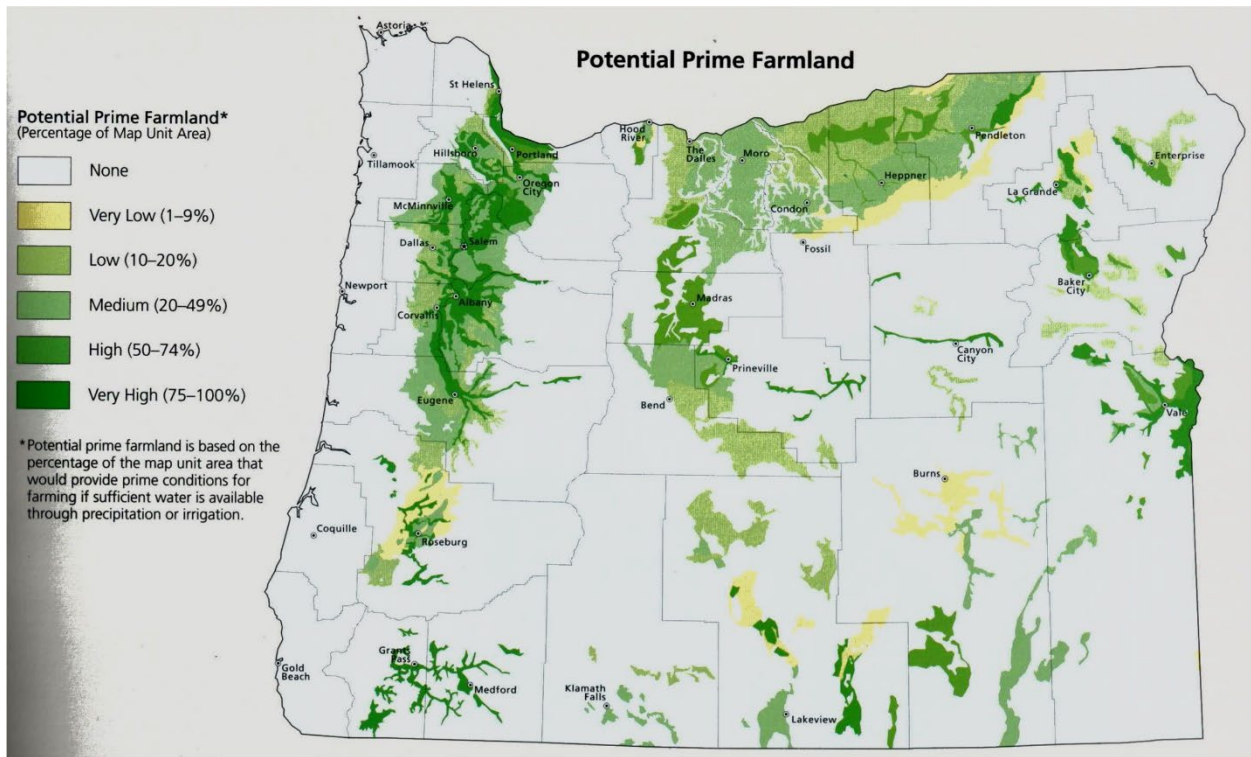
- From 2010 to 2021 Oregon's population grew by 11.4%
- Since the 2010 Census, Oregon had an average net migration of 31,000 people per year
- With 23,979 net migrants in 2021, all of Oregon's population increases over the year was due to net migration

With that data in mind, it is worth considering the question of just what resources are limited or constrained in the state of Oregon. A look at an aerial view from the Atlas of Oregon makes it quite clear that apart from a few inland valleys, most of Oregon and the entire Pacific northwest is high desert.

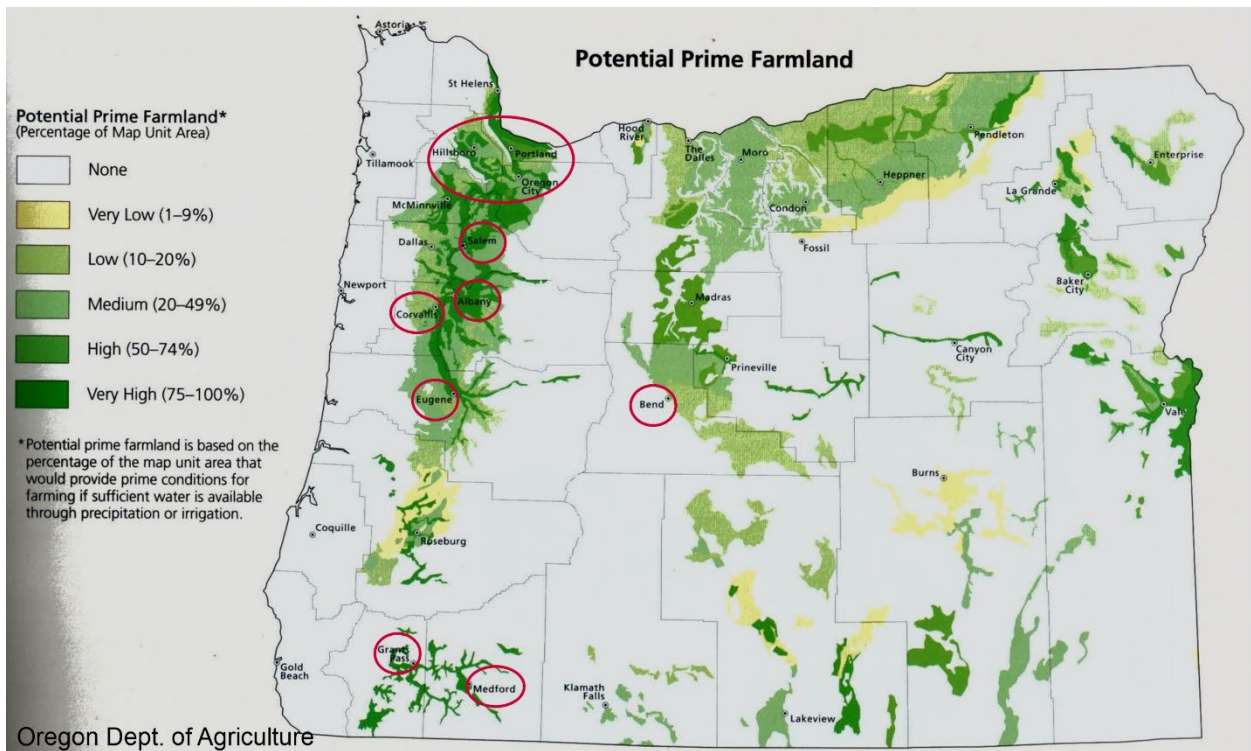


High desert is typically understood to be resource limited in terms of water and arable soil in addition to having a climate that is not conducive for agricultural food production.

Given that, now consider the distribution of Oregon's prime farmland (Oregon Department of Agriculture map).



The point is self-evident: the vast majority of Oregon’s prime farmland is in the Willamette Valley. Now consider the relationship of the eight MSA’s that received the vast majority of Oregon’s population growth from 2010 to 2021.



In the 2010 to 2021 period discussed in the Oregon Employment Dept. article, **just over 90% of the population growth was in the five MSA's located in the Willamette Valley.**

While the article did say that all of Oregon's population increases over in 2021 was due to net migration, it did not detail the net migration number for the entire 2010 to 2021 period. However, considering where most of the employment opportunities are located and that 72% of the population growth for the period was in the Portland MSA, it is reasonable to assume that over 80% of the net migration growth for that ten-year period was in the Willamette Valley.

The impact of population growth on available resources, in addition to quality of life and overall citizen health must be considered in any attempt to address Oregon's housing needs. This is particularly relevant given that UGB expansion in almost all of the listed MSAs will be at the expense of farmland, and often of prime farmland.

Balancing housing need against available resources is especially necessary when the oft cited ECO Northwest [study](#) of Oregon's future housing needs makes clear that 40% of that projected need is for housing for families earning >120% of median family income, and 20% is for families earning 80-120% of median family income.

Summary

The population and resource data makes the case for a land use system that controls growth and works to balance need against the limited resource reality. Oregon is fortunate to have such a system, and retaining UGBs as part of the land use system is critical.

Further, the data makes clear that urbanization needs to occur within or proximal to existing UGBs because that is where urban services are available. This is critical not just to minimize sprawl, but because those urban services are part of long range plans by cities and are paid for with public funding.

Finally, the data argues for not just focusing housing growth on unused land within UGBs, but on efficient use of that land for housing construction.

Oregon has to consider the carrying capacity of the available land, and weigh the maximal environmental load as it considers the ongoing population growth pressure and addresses the current housing needs. We also need to consider such things as food security.

Different calculations are made, but there is a definite relationship between population and available farmland. With Oregon at a population of 4.2M people and a growth rate of 11% per annum, we need today 21 million acres of high-quality farmland with adequate water.

Continued population growth at 11% is ultimately unsustainable over time and Oregon needs to protect the remaining precious resources it has.