

Growing energy on the farm good idea for ag industry

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By Barry Bushue & Katy Coba, Guest Comment

There should be no debate about the economic value of Oregon agriculture. The industry in Oregon — including input suppliers and on-farm production and processing, transportation, and wholesale marketing — equates to more than \$8 billion in economic activity. One in 12 jobs with a payroll exceeding \$2.8 billion is connected to this critical industry.

There are indications that Oregon agriculture is getting stronger. Net farm income is on the way back up, exports are increasing, and many commodity prices are better than they've been in the past five years. But global competition, rising costs, competition over natural resource use (water and land), and other challenges continue to face the industry.

That's why those things that can better the bottom line for agriculture are always worth considering.

Renewable energy is a good fit for the agricultural industry — not that the idea is new. Renewable energy technology has been around for centuries (windmills, water wheels, etc.). But we haven't yet matched today's technologies with the resources in ways that fit today's economy.

As Oregonians, we generally consume "energy" through three main sources: petroleum-based fuels for vehicles, electricity for homes and businesses, and natural gas for heating and energy generation.

Much of this energy comes from outside the region and even outside the country. But an opportunity has cropped up for agricultural producers in the Pacific Northwest. Why not produce more energy here and reap the economic benefit?

Consider that Oregon's producers own and manage more than 17 million acres of private land — the resource base for biomass that can potentially be used in energy generation. These lands are also the potential sites for wind energy generation. A recently awarded USDA grant is helping a group of growers assess the feasibility of actually owning the wind towers and sharing in the electricity revenue rather than merely leasing land for tower sites.

Consider that Oregon's producers own or control — directly or through irrigation districts — a vast network of canals, piping, and irrigation structures. Here are many opportunities for small-scale hydro projects that can generate electricity and offset pumping costs without affecting fish concerns.

Consider that Oregon's producers have the capacity to grow thousands of acres of oilseed crops that can be converted into biodiesel and other bio-based products.

Consider that hundreds of dairies and other livestock operations may be able to use methane digesters to manage animal nutrient issues, reduce odors, generate electricity, and produce compost products that can be resold.

Solar, geothermal, and other technologies also exist with many exciting potential applications.

None of this will happen overnight. It's no silver bullet. But the potential is real, and worth evaluating and pursuing where it makes economic sense.

To help growers, food processors, and other segments of the industry evaluate some of these options, our organizations are helping to plan, sponsor, and coordinate a two-day conference called "Harvesting Clean Energy" on Jan. 20-21 at the Convention Center in Portland.

To see a full agenda of the conference, go to: <http://www.harvestcleanenergy.org/conference>

We believe this is an excellent opportunity for producers and agricultural businesses to hear directly from others who are involved in projects related to renewable energy. We encourage producers in Oregon and the region to explore these options and network with others who are also thinking more broadly about how they can utilize their natural resource base in a positive way that benefits them economically and Oregon as a whole.

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