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Rethinking Oregon Agriculture

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Rethinking

OREGON

Agriculture

Darla (Goodnoe) Baggenstos '90 is no stranger to farming.

She grew up raising cattle, pigs and chickens in Tigard. After graduating from Linfield, she married Jim Baggenstos, a third-generation farmer at Baggenstos Farm just down the road from her family's farm.

Their farm is nearing the century mark, and opened an accompanying store 17 years ago. Families in the area come to shop at the store, relishing the fresh produce and gift items; they often spend the day at the farm, picking blueberries, marionberries and raspberries.

It seems idyllic. But Baggenstos worries about the farm's future, because she knows the economics of family farms are only getting tougher. The farm can't stay afloat by selling wholesale to grocery stores, for example.

"The market in Portland for potatoes — we can supply potatoes, but we can't supply potatoes year-round, or in the quantities they want," she explains. The farm store and the U-pick experiences are what keep the farm moving forward by connecting it directly to retail customers.

Baggenstos gets lots of questions from customers about how their produce is grown and if the farm's practices are sustainable and ecologically minded.

"It's, 'What are you doing to keep the environment safe?'" she says. "We get a lot of GMO questions. They want to be more educated."

This is the paradox affecting small and family-run farms in the United States.

On one hand, American consumers are more interested than ever in local food and buying directly from farmers. In 2014, the

U.S. Department of Agriculture reported a 76 percent increase in farmers markets nationwide in a six-year period.

On the other hand, small-scale farmers are finding it increasingly hard to make a living. According to a 2013 economic report from the White House, small family farms — those with annual sales less than \$250,000 — lose money every year on average because of high operating costs.

Even for small farms in the black, profitability is modest. One University of California at Santa Cruz report has some disheartening data: In 2011, the average yearly income for established farmers was \$18,119, a figure that dropped to \$1,902 for new farmers.

Difficulty surviving in agriculture is nothing new. John F. Kennedy once quipped, "The farmer is the only man in



While Darla (Goodnoe) '90 and Jim Baggenstos are no strangers to farming, small family farms are facing new pressures that worry the couple.



our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways.”

The future of farming is of particular importance in Oregon. Here, agriculture provides more than \$50 billion a year in sales, and accounts for 325,000 jobs.

Geoff Horning '95 has been involved in Oregon's agricultural economy for a long time now. He spent 11 years as executive director of Oregon Aglink and is now chief executive of Oregon Hazelnut Industries. He notes that the average age for farmers and ranchers in the United States is 58, compared to physicians at 46, chefs at 39 and high school teachers at 43.

“It's hard work and you don't make a lot of money for a lot of hours,” he says.

Horning adds that startup costs can be daunting. “[Oregon] has escalating real estate costs,” he said. “Land is expensive,

equipment is expensive — you almost need to be gifted [land] or inherit it.”

Yet, the future of farming doesn't seem hopeless to the Reedsport native.

“Ninety-eight percent of the farms in Oregon are still family farms,” Horning says. “There are great programs out there for young, small farmers.”

To stanch the loss of farmers in Oregon, organizations are offering education and resources for young and beginning farmers.

Rogue Farm Corps, started in 2003 by Southern Oregon farmers looking to mentor the next generation, offers hands-on experience on a diverse network of commercial family farms in the state. It has two programs available: an entry-level farm internship program; and an advanced-level farm apprenticeship program. The East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District similarly runs a farm incubator,

Headwaters Farm, designed to be a launching pad for farm businesses.

Local colleges and universities have education available to new farmers or farmers looking to continue their family farms. Clackamas Community College has a certificate in Urban Agriculture; Oregon State University's Extension Program holds a small farms annual conference and a workshop series for successful farm management.

Even the USDA has stepped in. In 2014, it redesigned its New Farmers website trying to appeal to a younger generation. Eric Hansen, a policy analyst for the National Young Farmers Coalition, called that “a huge, watershed kind of moment in thinking about how we can put farmers at the center,” helping farmers negotiate what had been a daunting mountain of paperwork and information to find programs

“The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways.” — *John F. Kennedy*

that might benefit them. The New Farmers website has channels for women in agriculture, veterans and youth; and offers loans, technical assistance for business planning, crop insurance, education and more.

But perhaps the best way to learn how to farm, Horning suggests, is “to get your feet wet.” And that’s just what first-generation farmer Beth Satterwhite ’10 did.

Satterwhite runs Even Pull Farm in McMinnville with her husband, Erik Grimstad ’10. They are in their fifth agricultural season; Satterwhite worked at Yamhill River Farm for two years before signing a lease for land from a fourth-generation family farm in Amity in 2014.

“If you want to get started, you need to work for another farm,” she says. “You’ll learn skills and be exposed to other people’s business models.”

Satterwhite points out that the arrangement is beneficial for both the novice and the experienced farmer.

“Farms need enthusiastic employees,” she says. “Being a farm employee is a great way to learn.”

It was Linfield that brought Satterwhite to farming in the first place, though.

“I did my thesis on CSA [community supported agriculture] farms,” she says,

explaining how customers purchase weekly produce shares. “I interviewed a bunch of farmers my senior year. That was the first time I thought, ‘Farming could be a career.’”

After graduation, she first worked for non-profits. “I hated working inside,” Satterwhite says, “and felt I wasn’t having the impact I wanted.”

Even Pull Farm does brisk business, growing vegetables year-round. The farm produces everything from “arugula to zucchini,” Satterwhite says — and cut flowers from early April through Thanksgiving.

The farm sells its goods via CSA subscriptions and at farmers markets, but a significant part of the business is selling to restaurants in Yamhill County. Chefs, notes Satterwhite, buy 52 weeks a year. Selling to chefs means part experimentation with new vegetables and unusual herbs, and part consistency. “Chefs need salad mix [year-round],” she says.

Even with this diversified customer base and hands-on training, Even Pull Farm isn’t immune from the issues surrounding small farms. Land costs, for instance.

“Land is crazy expensive around here,” Satterwhite explains as to why they are leasing land. “We’re looking maybe to purchase a farm and it’s proving very expensive.

We’ll keep looking. We’re playing the long game.”

There’s also the question of income. The farm is generating a small salary for Satterwhite, which she dubs “a win,” and paying two part-time employees, but she and Grimstad still count on his salary working for the City of McMinnville to survive.

“It’s true, we are not going to get rich,” she says, but she points out that they are taking steps to be smart about the future. “One of the things we did this year is that we opened a retirement account for me, and our intention is that the farm is going to contribute to it,” she says. “If it can’t pay me an income, at least it can help with these sorts of things.”

Another idea is for her to forgo a salary if they decide to buy land, and put that money toward a mortgage. “You have to think about your income in a creative way,” Satterwhite says. “It might not necessarily be in your pocket.”

Even with the steep learning curve, Satterwhite is hopeful about the future — for Even Pull and other small farms in Oregon.

“It’d be great to be sustainable for the amount of work we do,” she says. “We feel relatively positive.”

— Christian Feuerstein