



Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

Department of Agriculture

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MEMORANDUM

To: Board of Agriculture
From: Alexis Taylor, Director, Oregon Department of Agriculture
Date: January 26, 2018
Subject: Oregon Agriculture - One Year-36 Counties



Introduction:

In 1956 President Eisenhower said, "farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you're a thousand miles away from a corn field."

In the spirit of President Eisenhower's words, one of my top priorities was to travel to every county in the state within the first year. My goals were to meet Oregon's agricultural and rural leaders, see Oregon's agricultural landscapes, and understand some of the main issues and opportunities facing agriculture and rural communities in the state.

Over my first 12 months I traveled to all 36 counties, toured over 40 farms and ranches, held more than 11 roundtables, toured 23 businesses, toured nearly 15 various natural resource projects, and spoke at countless county and state agricultural organization meetings. During the farm, ranch tours and roundtables alone, I met over 180 Oregon producers. I was also able to spend time with 25 ODA field staff and see the practical side of ODA's work across the state.

The people, their communities, and agricultural commodities were diverse, but several common themes emerged from our conversations. This is, of course, not a complete list of what I heard and learned during my time on the road.

Themes:

While what can be grown in each part of the state might be different, similar issues were articulated across the state.

During every tour, meeting, or roundtable I attended, succession planning and challenges for young people entering agriculture came up. This was a universal topic in every part of the state - regardless of operation size, crop, or production system.

The National Young Farmer and Rancher Coalition recently found, "land access is the number one challenge young farmers face." This was articulated as a major challenge across Oregon as well.

There were challenges identified with the transfer of the farms and ranches from one generation to the next. Challenges such as the ability to support multiple families, tax implications, capital, etc. along with the need for the younger generation to gain the trust of their grandparents/parents to release operational control of the farm.

Water was another running theme heard around the state. Farmers and ranchers value water because it is essential to produce crops and livestock, but also because of its importance to fish, wildlife, and all Oregonians. There was interest in the continued work of ODA, and their partners, to protect the state's water resources through the Agricultural Water Quality Program.

Challenges around labor and workforce (often exasperated by federal immigration issues) was another consistent theme articulated across the state as well.

Finally, agricultural communities voiced frustration over feeling their economic contributions not being fully recognized by urban centers. Many felt a divide that agriculture, as a sector, should be more widely recognized and respected for its contribution to Oregon's economic vitality, livability and reputation.

Next steps:

In addition to informing my leadership at ODA, the wealth of information shared and learned during this 36-county tour is also incorporated into ODA's five-year strategic plan

Key Objective 6: Connect & Promote Oregon Agriculture in the new strategic plan will attempt to address some of the feedback heard during the county tours about helping bring the next generation into farming, and in maintaining a skilled labor force in agriculture. Additionally, helping to raise awareness about the value of agriculture's contribution to Oregon will be a main focus of the department over the next five years.

ODA plans to accomplish this in the following ways.

In 2018, ODA will develop a strategic communications plan to ensure we are talking to all Oregonians about the value farming, fishing and ranching bring to the state, the economy and the landscape.

ODA, as an economic agency (as well as a natural resource agency), is working with Regional Solutions and has begun attending the Regional Solutions Cabinet as an informal member to more fully integrate ODAs work into the state's economic development mission.

ODA will also work to strengthen partnerships with youth organizations across the state to highlight the career opportunities in agriculture. ODA has met with State FFA leadership as well as OSU College of Agriculture staff to identify and evaluate opportunities for ODA to engage youth. We have realized in these discussions that is important for ODA to brand itself as well as create a general awareness of the agency and its work. ODA will be at the 2018 State FFA Convention in March. At OSU, some initial opportunities and events have been identified including speaking at the College of Ag Leadership Academy, participating in OSU's Ag Day and collaborating with the campus career development center.

Conclusion:

While the goal of the tour was to be able to see Oregon's diverse agriculture first-hand and make connections with stakeholders across the state, one valuable takeaway has been the opportunity to meet and spend time with ODA field staff. This opportunity to spend time with so many of ODA's staff has reinforced what public service in the state truly means and the commitment ODA staff show to our mission.

I saw great value traveling the state and meeting Oregonians in their communities. I gained invaluable insight about Oregon's agricultural and food sector by interacting with Oregon's agricultural and food businesses, landscapes, and people firsthand. As we move forward, ODA will develop a regional approach so I can get out across the state and I look forward to working together with ODA employees, agency partners, and urban and rural Oregonians to incorporate the feedback received into ODA's short and long-term goals and objectives.