

"Agriculture: Oregon's Leading Industry: From Farm to Table." Salem: Oregon Department of Agriculture, 1998. (Reviewed by Kyle Walker)

The Oregon Department of Agriculture distributed this document in 1998 to inform the Oregon public about the state of the agriculture industry. Agriculture is evidently a very important part of Oregon's economy; the 37,000 self-employed operators generate \$3.4 billion of annual economic activity. Furthermore, more than 140,000 Oregon jobs are associated with the agriculture industry.

The publication's first section deals explicitly with land use, and provides several statistics that are relevant to the Willamette Valley. The Valley in 1996-1997 contributed \$1.5 billion in farm sales, which equates to about 50% of the total value for Oregon. However, Oregon's agricultural land is diminishing. Between 1959 and 1992, Oregon lost over 3.6 million acres, or 17%, of its farmland. According to the report, 66% of the 89,000 acres of farmland converted to residential and urban uses between 1982 and 1992 occurred in the Willamette Valley.

Seventy-eight percent of Oregon's water usage goes toward farm irrigation, which amounts to less than one percent of river flows. Oregon ranks ninth among states for agricultural water use. According to the report, agricultural water use accounts for 33 percent of total Willamette River basin water use. Two-thirds of this water comes from the Willamette and its tributaries. In comparison, public use, commercial, and industrial withdrawals account for two-thirds of Willamette Valley water use.

Oregon agriculture, according to the report, has taken many steps in order to protect the environment. Two such initiatives include the Healthy Streams Partnership and Senate Bill 1010, which asks the Department of Agriculture to work with farmers to develop overall water quality plans for watersheds. Furthermore, farmers are likely to employ measures such as irrigation management and fencing to protect riparian areas. The overall erodibility index for cropland in Oregon has been reduced by 13% since 1982, which is better than the national average. Oregon farmers use other methods such as cover crops and crop rotation to reduce soil erosion.

The Department of Agriculture explains that although agriculture is often blamed for water pollution, it is not always guilty. Potato growers who follow recommended fertilizer practices do not contribute to well water contamination by nitrates. Furthermore, the report maintains that agricultural chemicals are necessary to produce enough food to meet population demands. According to the report, farmers must be certified as pesticide applicators before using chemicals on their crops, and these chemicals are safe and effective when used correctly.

The rest of the report deals with production, marketing, and consumption issues, and addresses the key issues that pertain to each of these categories along the way. These sections deal with Oregon agriculture on a global and national scale rather than a local scale.

Critique

Most of the reports that I have read in the previous weeks, whether they pertain to wetlands loss or bank erosion, pinpoint agriculture as the chief cause of these watershed issues. This report evidently gives agriculture's side of the story, and uses very interesting methods to express its arguments. For example, in several instances the Department of Agriculture admits agriculture's role in a certain issue, such as water use, and then explains how a different factor, such as urbanization, is more responsible for problems associated with that issue.

A key element of this report is its simplicity. This document was distributed free of charge by the Department of Agriculture, and its readable language accompanied by colorful charts and graphics render the document accessible to practically anyone. Furthermore, to enhance the document's credibility, the Department of Agriculture includes a foreword by former Gov. John Kitzhaber.

Ultimately, this report achieves what it sets out to accomplish. It does not work well as a scholarly resource due to its lack of depth, but it does express its message that agriculture is an important part of Oregon's economy. I especially enjoyed reading what the Department of Agriculture had to say about water and pollution issues; its message that "we are doing our best to protect the environment" is clear and would resonate with its target audience, the average Oregonian.

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