Clackamas County teaming up with state to retain, expand agriculture jobs

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A new program aims to help Clackamas County's agricultural industry by connecting businesses, nonprofits and government agencies that work with food producers, processors and distributors.

The ONEStop program is part of Oregon Solutions, a statewide program that takes on big local projects that are contentious or involve many players and helps figure out solutions or a compromise. The county's Agriculture and Forest Economic Development program and Oregon Solutions will split the project's $45,000 cost.

County Commissioner Martha Schrader, who operated an organic farm for several years, and Clackamas Community College dean Shelly Parini are leading the county's contribution to the project. They will join county and state officials to brainstorm an "operators manual" for ONEStop.

This is how it is envisioned to work: Say a farmer wants to become organic certified, so she calls Oregon Tilth. If Oregon Tilth is part of ONEStop, the person who answers the phone will automatically think, "What else does this person need to know to be successful?"

The Oregon Tilth employee calls a trusted supplier for organic farms, makes sure the farmer has the proper permits and connects the newbie with an established organic farmer as a mentor.

Or perhaps a farmer wants to convert a few fallow acres to a barn for dairy cows. He calls Clackamas County to find out what permits are needed, and when he gets off the phone, it rings with another local farmer who has a couple of milking cows to sell.

"It's easier for us to navigate through the system because we live in it and we are part of it," said Rick Gruen, who works on agricultural issues for the county development department and has done much of the technical legwork for the project.

Part of the challenge, Gruen said, is getting business, nonprofits and others in the agriculture industry to buy into the program. It might be a little extra work to think about what else a customer might need, but
the effort should pay off if it increases the number of customers eventually.

Schrader, Gruen and Parini identified the need for a program like ONEStop nearly a decade ago, when Damascus started the incorporation process.

Before it was a city, Damascus was home to a cluster of the county's nursery industry. Schrader, in her first term as commissioner, lamented with Gruen and Parini, then the county's development director, that many of the city's nurseries would have to move to make way for density and city planning.

The three started hatching a plan to retain the agricultural jobs already in the county, while dreaming of ways to expand them. Loss of agricultural jobs would be a huge blow to the county's economy.

Clackamas County's agricultural sales annually ranks in Oregon's top five, with $343 million in 2013. The county's 1,879 square miles are largely forested or farm land, extending out toward Mount Hood.

The county produces the most Christmas trees in the country. Farm stands selling fruit and hazelnuts dot the roads. Agriculture processors and distributors also are headquartered in the county.

Connecting those people to the robust restaurant scene in neighboring Portland, or to the businesses and groups that certify, permit or provide services to farmers and processors is challenging.

Portland area residents spend $4.8 million annually on the consumption of food, Gruen said, but 95 percent of the food comes from outside the metro area.

If the county can capture more of that money spent on ingredients, he estimates it could ratchet up the portion of the county's revenue that comes from agriculture by about $20 million.

Schrader stressed the need first to stabilize the number of agricultural jobs in the county. A county study found that only one third of agricultural workers are younger than 75 years old, underscoring that the system needs to be friendlier to entice new generations to keep plowing.

Schrader hopes ONEStop will lessen the burden on agricultural workers to access the services they need to survive and grow.

-- Molly Harbarger

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