

THE OTHER OREGON

A VOICE FOR RURAL OREGON

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 3 | SPRING 2026

THE FIGHT AGAINST INDUSTRIAL SOLAR

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Editor's Note

The Other Oregon exists to bring you stories about the people of rural Oregon and the issues they face. In this issue, we bring you a nice selection of both:



- In Wasco County, a grassroots group of residents is fighting to stop the construction of a 14,000-acre solar electric facility on land designated for farm use. Normally county officials determine such zoning variances, but the size of the project pushes it to the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council. Opponents of the project say it will change the nature of their farming and ranching community. But the project is in line with the state's alternative energy mandates.

- County fairs are a vital part of rural life. But in many counties, the maintenance on the aging facilities are outpacing the revenue they bring in. In Polk County, facing upgrades to the electrical systems that will cost \$1 million, officials are considering closing the fairgrounds.

Shutting down the fairgrounds would be a serious blow to farming in the county, both psychologically and in financial terms, said Tim Ray, the fair board's chair and dean of agriculture science and technology at Chemeketa Community College.

Fair boards across the state are waiting to see what happens, and many worry that once one fair closes it will start a domino effect for other financially-pressed institutions.

- Robert Fossek II has been carving a dugout canoe at Wallowa Lake to strengthen the connection between the Cayuse, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Nez Perce, Palus and other interrelated bands of the Columbia Basin and to reconnect them with their ancestral waterways and cultural sites.

"This is only my second canoe, so I'm still learning," he said between strokes of an adze.

If you have a story that you would like us to cover, please email me at joseph.beach@capitalpress.com. We look forward to bringing you the stories of rural Oregon.

Joe Beach
Editor and publisher

SPRING 2026

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On the cover:

"Save Juniper Flat" sign on a Wasco County fence.

Photo courtesy of Carolyn Campbell

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WHO GETS SACRIFICED? WHO GETS SAVED?

The fight against industrial solar on exclusive farmland comes to Wasco County

STORY & PHOTOS BY CAROLYN CAMPBELL

Wasco County's Juniper Flat, a remote Rural Oregon community on the eastern side of Mt. Hood between the Deschutes and White rivers, is the most recent rural region to submit opposition to massive utility-scale solar projects.

Residents argue that if permitted, the industrial scale solar project will not only decimate legally protected exclusive farm use (EFU) land but also threaten to extinguish their generations-old community.

The Deschutes Solar and Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) Facility is a proposed 1,000 megawatt (MW) solar photovoltaic energy generation facility with related or supporting facilities including a proposed battery energy storage system with up to 4,000 MW hours of storage capacity, according to the Oregon Department of Energy. The proposed facility would be located on approximately 14,418 acres (22.5 sq miles) of predominately private land zoned for Exclusive Farm Use (EFU) in Wasco County, approximately 10 miles southwest of Maupin.

BrightNight, the project's developer, says the facility will address regional power needs in the Pacific Northwest, delivering energy to approximately 200,000 homes.

It chose Juniper Flat for three reasons: lower quality farmland; close proximity to transmission lines; and strong landowner support with contiguous parcels, largely devoid of sensitive species. Additionally, it asserts the Deschutes Project will bring significant economic value through job creation, local tax revenues, and property tax benefits.

Connie Lee, a fifth-generation homesteader and designated spokesperson for Save Juniper Flat, a grassroots coalition against massive solar facilities, is unwaveringly opposed to the facility.

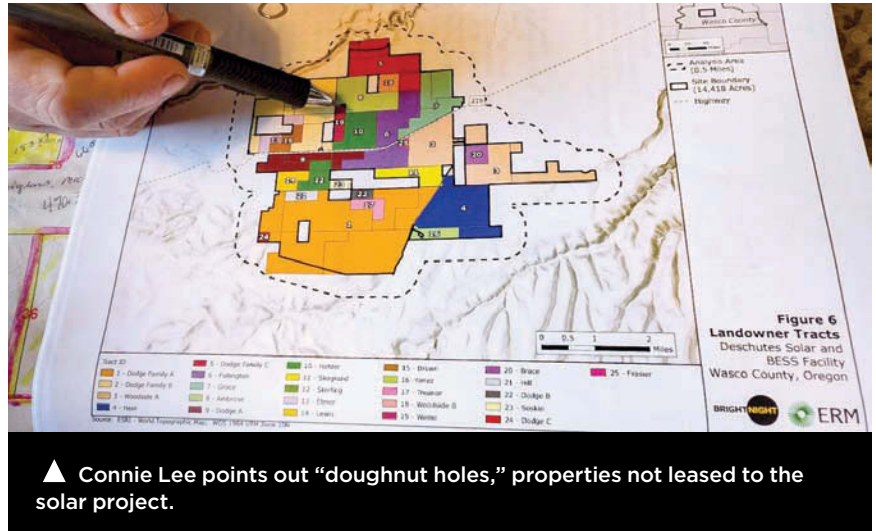
Lee believes these developers are leveraging Gov. Tina Kotek's chase to secure federal credits before they expire in what she terms a "solar gold rush." She said when Kotek created Oregon's Energy Facility Siting Council (EFSC), a volunteer council, developers started flooding the region.



◀ Ailee and Tara Aschoff stand at property line.



▲ Connie Lee reviewing proposed solar facility site map



▲ Connie Lee points out “doughnut holes,” properties not leased to the solar project.

Residents argue that if permitted, the industrial scale solar project will not only decimate legally protected exclusive farm use (EFU) land but also threaten to extinguish their generations-old community.

“With the creation of siting council, the state, rather than counties decides to permit or deny a permit. So far, the state has failed to deny any application.”

To provide a view of the scale of the project, Lee started driving at the base of Mt. Hood along Highway 216 just as the desert landscape glistens beyond the trees.

“For the next six miles this scenic corridor will be bordered by chain fence and solar panels,” she said pointing to golden fields expanding across the horizon. “They assure us the panels will be ‘glare-free’.”

At the corner of Highway 216 and Reservation Road, one of the borders of the project, sits Way Station, a convenience/feed store and gas station.

Neil Fullington, the convenience store/gas station owner, chose to be one of first to sign onto the project, asserting that he wanted to be ‘at the table’ rather than not know what’s going on and then have his land be on the outside of a potential project.

He described the land as subpar.

“Even if we were to trade this and for the most fertile ground in the United States that produces the most food — if you’ve ranched it and farmed it at the same time, the income wouldn’t be anywhere close to what the income is for this solar production,” Fullington said. »



◀ Wasco County commissioners discuss the solar project proposal meeting.

Rancher Grayson Morelli, owner of Morelli Meats, rejects the claim that the soil is subpar.

“Oregon created Exclusive Farm Use zoning to keep farmland agricultural,” he said. “Without a doubt, farmers across the nation are struggling, but that does not mean we should turn EFU land into solar fields. The attempt of these developers to bypass the state’s clearly defined law, offering landowners obscenely high leasing rates, makes it nearly impossible for those ranchers, like me, who lease to plan for our future.”

In a firm tone he avowed, “Protected agriculture land should not be permitted to disappear from production. If we open the gates now, we will become the Hillsboro of tomorrow.”

Kelly Howsley-Glover, Wasco County’s Community Development managing director, affirmed Wasco county’s EFU land assessment.

“A significant portion of the Deschutes Solar and Battery Energy Storage System Facility is sited on Exclusive Farm Use (EFU) land. By the letter of the law this land is designated agricultural. The county

evaluates the land based on that exclusive farm use zone regardless of people’s feelings about whether or not it should be an exclusive farm use zone.”

While adamant in his stance, Grayson doesn’t blame neighbors for making decisions they believe are best for their families. Advocacy groups insist that poor farm communities across the state are getting sacrificed by developers backed by large investment firms.

“They come in, tempt us with pennies for potential aid, then try to claim we are fighting against our neighbor. We’re not! We are fighting companies taking advantage of the chase for fast dollars through tax credits,” he said.

For Lee, the fight to save Juniper Flat began in earnest in October, during a meeting in Maupin.

The room overflowing, Lee asked the county commissioners how the county would evaluate her property when a solar facility encases her family farm. Farmers and ranchers wanted to know how their irrigation water would be impacted, and the fire danger from the large battery storage facilities.

Wasco County’s Land Use Planning Special Advisory Group assured the residents they would investigate. Leaving the meeting, in hushed tones residents grumbled, certain the commissioners would dismiss their concerns.

Five months later, planners Sean Bailey and Daniel Doherty presented their findings to commissioners.

During their hour-long presentation, using data supplied by multiple state agencies, Bailey and Doherty highlighted missing data including, but not limited to, EFU exemptions, ill-defined setbacks, lack of fire hazard mitigation, vague mapping of vital irrigation in a drought-prone region, and concerns regarding the county’s scenic corridor.

Bailey and Doherty stated their concerns regarding missing application data.

Commissioner Scott Hege referenced emails commissioners have received concerning the project.

“We received several requests to ‘slow down the train.’ Unfortunately, we can’t do that because we’re not controlling the train. The train is going,” he said.



▲ South Wasco Town Hall Meeting in Maupin.

“Doughnut holes are those landowners, like me, who chose not to sign the developer lease agreement. If this project is approved, we will be surrounded by solar panels, millions of solar panels.”

Lee disagrees. “We must stop this train! Our land and our community are at stake.” She addressed the commissioners.

“Doughnut holes are those landowners, like me, who chose not to sign the developer lease agreement. If this project is approved, we will be surrounded by solar panels, millions of solar panels. Our community will be encased by endless miles of eight-foot-tall fencing. If the solar facility is permitted, I will be living in a prison yard of chain-link fencing.”

Ailee Aschoff, a millennial third-generation owner, horse rancher, and trainer, echoed the advisory panel’s warning of fire danger.

“When fires rage across the grasslands here, which is a common occurrence, neighbors, not the fire department, band together dousing flames using our farm’s tiny arena watering trucks. With the increased hazard of solar placement just beyond our property line, we will be forced to choose — Do we save our horses, or do we save ourselves?”

As debates over EFU farmland, water utilization, and fire hazards rage on, Save Juniper Flat, and local ranchers/farmers remain adamant.

“We hear the governor’s position regarding energy needs. We respect personal and small-scale renewable energy projects who responsibly site their facilities with consideration and coordination with their community. The Deschutes Solar and Battery Energy Storage System Facility does not represent any of those conditions,” Lee said. “This proposed facility threatens us and our land. It is not near us. It is on top of us.”

Landowners who’ve signed a lease agreement are legally bound not to share the conditions of their deal, though multiple residents requested anonymity and quietly shared the circumstances leading to their decision.

John Pierce, president of Pine Grove Water District, explained why the district signed a \$75,000 memorandum of understanding.

Pierce said he personally opposes putting solar facilities on deeded, private land.

“But in defense of the water district, being a board member necessitates me putting aside my personal beliefs and almost becoming double-minded to consider what’s best for the community. We have landowners who’ve signed their land up for leases because they’ve been pinched up against the wall so hard there’s hardly any profit left in their land. We also have a high percentage of residents who are the poorest in the region.”

Upon approval, MOU funds will be earmarked toward helping build a new well, reclaiming the aging community center, and upgrading the current water system.

“If the solar field is approved, we didn’t want to be the ones who drug our heels so hard that we missed opportunities to generate revenue back into our water district,” he said. “\$75,000 with no strings attached, will go a long way to helping our struggling town.”

BrightNight says the project will benefit the community.

“Creating rural jobs is one of the most important benefits of solar projects like this,” the company said. “Utility-scale solar projects generally create about 2.1 jobs per megawatt (MW) installed. While smaller-scale projects have higher job density, large utility projects (e.g., 100 MW) can support hundreds of construction-related jobs with approximately \$2.8 billion in local economic impact per 1 GW of new capacity. This includes equipment operators (dozers, graders, trenchers), electricians, ironworkers and steel installers, safety managers, project managers, site supervisors, and truck drivers.” »

Explaining the benefits of solar facilities in struggling communities, Oregon Solar + Storage Industries Association acknowledged that solar projects often need to hire extra labor from outside the area to build the facility and that once completed utilize minimal employees. Executive Director Angela Crowley-Koch stated that while local jobs are minimal, communities benefit from property tax revenue — providing long-term funding to strengthen local budgets, improve infrastructure, and fund essential services like schools, roads, and emergency services.

Regional advocacy groups and state-wide associations stay quiet. Sen. Ron Wyden’s office invited residents to attend an upcoming Wasco County town hall but did not provide comment for this story.

Lee and other residents assert that they are alone in the fight, other than Wasco County’s Land Use Planning Special Advisory Group.

“We may lose. But we are going to keep on fighting to protect our community for generations to come and support local farmers and ranchers as vital regional producers in both agricultural and ranching economies,” Lee said.

While EFSC reviews the developer’s proposal, Lee sighed.

“For now, there is nothing left for us to do. It’s now in the hands of the Siting Council. We hope they will listen to the advisory council and vote to protect our community and support local farmers and ranchers as vital producers in both agricultural and ranching economies. ■

Carolyn Campbell is a freelance writer.



◀ John Pierce, President of Pine Grove Water District.
— Connie Lee photo

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WOULD CLOSING POLK COUNTY FAIR TRIGGER ‘DOMINO EFFECT?’

Rising costs may threaten all of Oregon’s fairgrounds

STORY BY MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI

With the fairgrounds facing mounting maintenance costs, Polk County officials are considering closing the facility.

A common fear surrounding the possible closure is that the impacts won’t be confined to the county’s borders.

Financial problems are hardly out of the ordinary among Oregon’s 36 county fairgrounds, so Polk County’s situation is seen as potentially setting a worrisome precedent throughout the state.

If it becomes the first county to shut down its fairgrounds, the thinking goes, others may be less reluctant to follow the same course in the future.

“We’ve heard rumors that other counties might follow suit,” said J.L. Wilson, lobbyist for the Oregon Fairs Association. “I do expect it would probably be the first domino to fall in a regrettable trend.”

Due to mounting upkeep expenses, Polk County may close the fairgrounds — which it owns — at the end of 2026, unless a new source of funding for the property is secured.

But the outlook for that facility and others like it in Oregon isn’t entirely without hope.

In Polk County’s case, one possibility to save the facility would require voters to pass an operating levy that would increase property taxes in the county by 10-13 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, enough to raise about \$800,000 a year for the fairgrounds.

The county government is likely to put forth such a ballot initiative on the November ballot, though a final decision will be made by June, said Tina Andersen, the fair manager.

Expenses are rising

This year isn’t the first time that the fairgrounds has found itself in dire straits: A quarter century ago, the county was similarly considering shutting it down, but was persuaded to keep it open if the facility could be “run as a business,” Andersen said.

Under a plan implemented by the fair board, which operates the facility, its debts were paid off and it was turning a profit within three years, she said.

Since then, the annual fair and roughly 700 other events held on the property each year have brought in enough money to keep the operation afloat — but the cost of keeping the 74-year-old fairgrounds in working order has risen dramatically, Andersen said.



▲ COURTESY YAMHILL COUNTY FAIR

Financial problems are not out of the ordinary among Oregon's county fairgrounds, Polk County's situation is seen as potentially setting a precedent throughout the state. If it becomes the first county to shut down its fairgrounds, the thinking goes, others may be less reluctant to follow the same course in the future.



▲ Tina Andersen, manager of the Polk County Fair in Rickreall, Ore., hopes that an operating levy that may be on the November ballot will allow the fairground to avoid closure at the end of the year. — MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI PHOTO

“We pay our bills, but we’re struggling to continue to pay our bills and do maintenance on a facility of this age,” she said.

Overhauling the electrical system, which would require roughly \$1 million, was the final straw that’s led to the current predicament, Andersen said. Without a significant upgrade, the existing electrical system from 1952 threatens to become “a liability issue.”

In the past, smaller projects have been funded with grants, but “grant money of that size is hard to find” and the facility’s profits aren’t substantial enough for such a major investment, she said.

“Even though we’ve been working on it for several years, we just haven’t found the right way to do it. The county doesn’t have the money to do it. We don’t make that kind of money on top of operating costs to do it,” she said. “At some point, you run into a brick wall.”

Shutting down the fairgrounds would be a serious blow to farming in the county, both psychologically and in financial terms, said Tim Ray, the fair board’s chair and dean of agriculture science and technology at Chemeketa Community College.

For example, children involved in the 4-H and FFA organizations sell more than \$600,000 worth of livestock and other projects at the fair each year, he said. If that stopped, it would affect the livestock producers and feed suppliers who those children buy from. »

“You take \$600,000 out of the economy, somebody is going to feel it somewhere,” Ray said.

Ending the annual fair would have a less tangible but no less profound cultural impact on the rural county, which depends on having an annual showcase for its farming traditions, he said.

“County fairs are one of the last interfaces between agriculture and the consumer, and the thought of losing that scares me. The average consumer is already so far removed from where their food, fiber, and fuel is produced,” Ray said. “Losing one of those last real interfaces really could be devastating in terms of an appreciation for agriculture.” »

Apart from farming, the county fair provides a single time and location for residents to “come and gather and catch up” across generations, he said.

“That sense of safety in community, I don’t know that occurs in a lot of other places on that scale,” Ray said.

The facility hosts fundraisers throughout the year that generate about \$750,000 for local community programs, and provides an affordable venue for an “independent living” course that teaches foster kids to cook and otherwise take care of themselves, Andersen said.

When people had to evacuate their homes during the Labor Day wildfires in 2020, the fairgrounds temporarily sheltered 75 families and about 400 animals, she said.

During the COVID outbreak, testing and vaccinations were offered at the facility, as it had enough room for people to maintain the required social distancing, she said.

In the event of a future disaster, such as an earthquake that destroys roads and bridges, the property can act as an emergency relief site where food can be stored in walk-in freezers and where helicopters can land, Andersen said.

If there’s a mass shooting at a local school, the facility is also the designated location to bring students where they can be picked up by their parents, she said.

“It’s much more than just a fair. It’s providing needed infrastructure,” Andersen said. “There’s no other place that you can do that in Polk County. None. I mean, there’s a lot that we do for the county itself.”

Unlike other local government service providers, though, county fairgrounds are expected to be financially self-sufficient, said Ray.

“You don’t expect your sheriff’s department to write enough tickets to make money. It’s not a thing, right? That’s never an expectation,” he said. “Nor is it an expectation that your school system generates enough fees and fines to make money.”

Expecting the county fairgrounds to make money, or at least break even, is a tough proposition because the facility is also expected to offer affordable rates for local events and programs, he said.



▲ Tina Andersen, manager of the Polk County Fair in Rickreall, Ore., says the need for an electrical upgrade costing about \$1 million may result in the closure of the fairgrounds. — MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI PHOTO

Other fairs in trouble

The situation is only becoming more challenging for Polk County, but it isn’t the only local government to confront the dilemma, Ray said.

“If we close, we’ll be the first. We will not be the only and we will not be the last,” he said. “Nobody wants to be the first county to go down in history for closing its fairgrounds. So, everybody’s waiting and watching: Who’s actually going to have to pull the trigger because of economics? As soon as that first one falls, there will be others that follow.”

The financial prospects for the Yamhill County Fair — Polk County’s neighbor to the north — likewise seems “always vulnerable,” said Gary Wertz, the fair manager.

“The expenses are going up and the income has leveled out,” he said. “The day is coming when our expenses will exceed our income.”

Wertz said he doesn’t discount the possibility of a contagion if the Polk County Fair comes to an end and “apathy sets in.”

“I think it’s just a domino effect,” he said.

If children no longer have an outlet to sell their livestock, that disrupts a tradition that has long been critical to sustaining agriculture, Wertz said.

“Those kids are our future leaders, our future farmers. Once you have that break in generations, it is tough to get it back,” he said, adding that other industries would be affected as well.

“The fairs are the only vehicle that promotes the whole county,” Wertz said. “Everything that is good about that county is what the fair promotes, and that is sad if you lose that.”

As these facilities get older, though, it becomes more expensive for counties to not only keep them safe but also relevant in the modern age, said J.L. Wilson of the Oregon Fairs Association.

With local governments facing budget constraints affecting key services, it’s also harder for them to justify spending more money on fairgrounds, he said. “They tend to gravitate to the bottom of priorities, as other things tend to take more of a priority.”

Financial help

However, the financial health of county fairs across Oregon is getting a big shot in the arm.

Oregon law directs 1% of state lottery funds to an account for county fairs, but that amount was capped in the early 2000s, Wilson said.

That limit was increased from about \$1.9 million to nearly \$2.9 million a year in 2025, which works out to about \$79,000 per county fair.

During this year's short legislative session, lawmakers approved a bill that eliminates the cap altogether.

Since lottery revenues have "exploded" over the past two decades, county fairs could collectively begin receiving more than \$12 million a year in mid-2027, he said.

The financial details aren't yet clear, but it appears that removing the cap could equate to each county fair being entitled to \$160,000 to \$240,000 of lottery funds per year — double or triple the current level, he said.

"That was a massive development in our favor," Wilson said.

The Oregon Fairs Association had long advocated for fairgrounds to receive the full 1% of lottery revenues, emphasizing that these are year-round facilities with an important purpose.

"The fairgrounds themselves serve mostly a resilience function, an emergency function," Wilson said. "I think the value of fairgrounds has really been on display in adverse times."

The additional state money isn't expected to fully resolve the Polk County's facility's troubles, given the amount required for the electrical upgrade and other needed improvements, Anderson said.

The possibility of an operating levy on the November ballot may offer the most immediate lifeline, though the initiative's success is hardly guaranteed, said Wilson.

"It is an effort that is an uphill climb from the get-go, because it is all volunteer-driven," he said. "It is a different ballgame

if you are doing it with just volunteer work."

Such volunteer campaigns can't rely on the same "tools" as those with better financial backing, such as survey research to help decide which messages are most effective with voters, he said.

"Absent survey research, you are guessing as to what resonates," Wilson said.

Another problem is that people often skip voting on down-ballot initiatives with which they are unfamiliar, potentially allowing those issues to be decided by voters who are averse to tax hikes, he said.

Ultimately, the campaign will have to mobilize residents who are strongly in favor of keeping the county fair alive, which means persuading them it's not just a "chicken little" threat to close the facility, Wilson said.

"Either we want it or we don't, because there's no one coming in to save it," he said. "The word needs to go out that this is either do or die." ■

Mateusz Perkowski is a reporter for Capital Press.

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READY TO RUN

Sled dogs give tours despite little snow

STORY BY NOEMI ARELLANO-SUMMER



It was warmer at the Mt. Bachelor sled dog area than it was in Bend, but the dogs of the Oregon Trail of Dreams Sled Dog Rides didn't seem to mind, lying in the cold snow with their paws in front of them or yipping excitedly and turning in their harnesses. The dogs, mostly Alaskan huskies, were clipped into place and ready for a run — pulling a sled behind them that will hold anyone brave enough to take the journey.

A thin coat of fresh snow covered the ground, crunchy underfoot and at times feeling more like ice. A guide mentioned that the weather was warmer than was ideal

for the dogs, who have long been bred to thrive in the worst of winter weather.

Rachael Scdoris, who grew up in Central Oregon and ran the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race several times in the early 2000s as the first-legally blind person to compete, runs the company and operates many of its rides. Her father, Jerry, started it all and still sometimes helps out.

“We introduce thousands of people to this sport every year,” said Rachael Scdoris. “Not all of those thousands go for rides, but so many just come over and interact with the dogs and they're amazed. They have no idea that this even existed.”

They have roughly 80 dogs, Jerry Scdoris said, and during the winter the dogs run sleds at Mt. Bachelor and race elsewhere across the United States. In the summer, some dogs stay in Central Oregon while others go to Alaska to give tours on carts in their version of a summer camp.

The dogs live in one of several kennels, each the size of a football field, out at Jerry Scdoris's 40-acre property in the Badlands Wilderness. There are two bunkhouses where guides live alongside the dogs. The dogs are fed a mix of commercial food and meat scraps from Costco, which has a partnership with the company. »

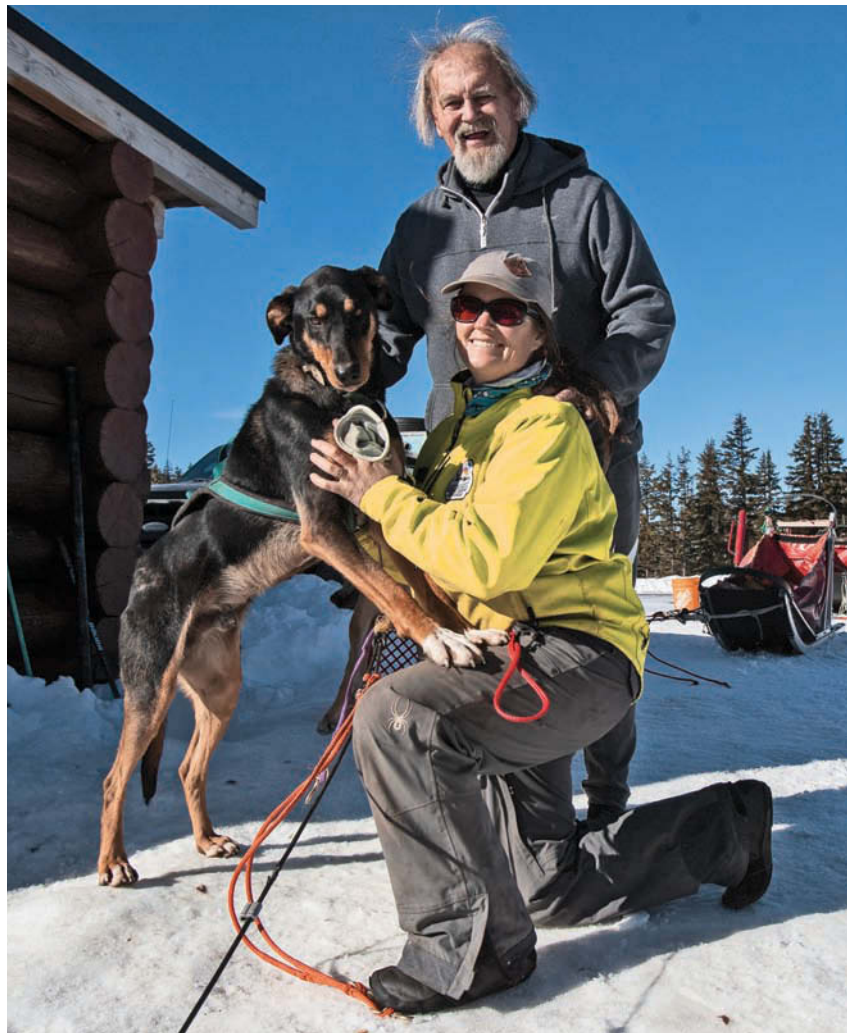


◀ Guide Trevor Van Langendon, at left, helps Ira Ryan steer the sled as Ryan's mom, Janette Ryan-Busch, and daughter, Alma Bailey-Ryan, 8, ride inside during an Oregon Trail of Dreams sled dog tour on Friday near Mt. Bachelor Ski Area west of Bend. — Joe Kline photo

Between 10 and 20 of Scdoris's dogs are considered focused-racing. Top animals can run faster than 30 mph, though race winners generally average 16 to 17 mph over grueling, sometimes weekslong treks.



▲ A dog barks as the Oregon Trail of Dreams team prepare for a sled dog tour on Friday near Mt. Bachelor Ski Area. — Joe Kline photo



▲ Rachael Scdoris and her father, Jerry Scdoris, pose with one of their dogs in front of a sled. — Joe Kline photo



► Sled dogs rest while awaiting an Oregon Trail of Dreams tour. — Joe Kline photo

Most of the dogs are spayed or neutered by the Oregon State University veterinary school, which provides free or discounted shots to the dogs. There is a puppy kennel for the few dogs who are considered the best breeders. Puppies are raised and trained for racing or sled tours.

Between 10 and 20 of Scdoris's dogs are considered focused-racing. Top animals can run faster than 30 mph, though race winners generally average 16 to 17 mph over grueling, some-times weekslong treks. When training, dogs usually run at a manageable pace of 15 to 16 mph. For a big race, 12 dogs are in a team at once, and the musher has a pool of 16 to choose from in case dogs are injured or when they get tired, said Jerry Scdoris.

"You know each dog individually and you address that issue," he said, referring to problems with their feet or muscles that may develop over a race as demanding as the Iditarod.

When the dogs are retired, there's a particular pen for them. Occasionally, dogs who are especially sweet and predictable are given away as pets. But Scdoris said most of their dogs know their jobs and

that's what they like to do best.

Rachael Scdoris said outdoor enthusiasts have opportunities to recreate alongside such dogs. Biking with dogs has become more popular, she said, and there are other sled dog sports to get involved in.

Tours help pay the bills and have priority, but Rachael Scdoris said it's always fun to race and see what her team can do.

"We always belong," she said. "We may not always win — although we've won our fair share as well — but we always belong there with the best."

Rachael Scdoris's first major race was in Wyoming when she was 15, and she camped three times in the Rockies above 10,000 feet, racing 300 miles over the course of several days.

Jerry Scdoris first learned about sled dogs in the 1970s. He started with Siberian huskies but soon moved on to Alaskan huskies, who are bred for speed.

"(I started) with a bunch of Siberian huskies, which is not a good idea if your intention is to win big races. And I didn't know my intention was to win big races," Jerry Scdoris, 78, told *The Bulletin*.

He also moved from the more temperate southern Oregon Coast to Bend in 1979, because he wanted to train his dogs in the snow. By the early 1990s, he was racing and offering sled dog rides.

"I found out early I could stay broke trying to race with my Siberians or I could give rides and actually pay my bills," he said. "Now it's 40 years later or something, and we've given over 50,000 people a sled dog ride."

He said this winter has been unusual thus far. Normally, they run 10 tours a day. But the day of our visit, they only ran two.

Normally, Jerry Scdoris said, snow would be piled high as the rooftops, but not so this year. The organization has refunded rides from before Christmas, when there wasn't enough snow to run. It has five full-time employees.

"We still feel we can salvage it with one good snow," said Jerry Scdoris. "I'm hoping that it snows two feet tonight and two feet tomorrow night and that they get all their massive snow equipment out here and give us this beautiful trail." ■

Noemi Arellano-Summer is a reporter for The Bulletin.



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NORTHWEST WINERIES START TO DIVERSIFY

Non-alcoholic wines boost bottom line

STORY BY KYLE ODEGARD

▲ Cyler and Taralyn Varnum (from left) of Varnum Vintners chat with Clive Pursehouse, U.S. editor of Decanter Magazine, as he samples their non-alcoholic wines.

— Kyle Odegard photo

While many wineries are struggling, Varnum Vintners is seeing year-to-year growth and retaining club members thanks to a once-vilified offering — non-alcoholic wines.

“We got lucky in that somebody approached us before the trend started, so we were ahead of the curve,” said Taralyn Varnum, who owns the business with husband Cyler Varnum.

Making wines without alcohol wasn’t an easy decision, though. “My first response was, ‘That sounds ridiculous. Why would we do that?’” Cyler Varnum recalled.

The couple recognized growing interest and released their first NA bottles in 2022, gradually building a following.

“We’re trying to make wine more approachable but also inclusive. ... It’s an awesome option to have,” Cyler Varnum said, during a panel discussion Jan. 10 at the Sip & Savor: Community Tasting Experience Series.

The series, hosted by Brooks Wine, is a year-round exploration of NA craft beverages and lifestyles and continues in April, August and October.

The Varnums continue to focus on producing delicious and affordable daily drinkers containing alcohol, mainly sparkling wines, but NA wines are a key component of their success.

Experts said a few Pacific Northwest wineries are making NA wines to diversify and boost bottom lines, and more are expected to join the segment.

Taralyn Varnum said there are about five in the Willamette Valley.

The shift to NA wines is a response to beliefs that drinking alcohol is unhealthy, and comes as the wine industry is facing disinterest and oversupply.

“In a marketplace where people are ripping grapes out, it’s certainly something they’re considering,” said Jim Harbertson, Washington State University professor of enology.

Non-alcoholic wines viewed as inferior

NA wines are viewed as inferior and difficult for food pairings, but advanced techniques are generating more complex beverages.

Harbertson said scientists were surprised to discover alcohol is the driving force behind wine characteristics such as sweetness, astringency, mouthfeel and aroma.

“It’s the paperclip, the glue, the whole thing that holds it together. ... There really aren’t easy ways to replace something that can affect everything,” he added.

There are two main methods of making NA adult beverages. The first is creating a product mimicking characteristics of alcohol, and the other is to dealcoholize liquid.

With either path, wineries often use additives and results can taste artificial, experts said.

One common solution is adding sugar, but that can taste cloying and is counterproductive for people making healthy choices, Harbertson said.

Because of the challenges with making NA wines, some wineries produce gourmet grape juices instead.

“Table grapes don’t hold a candle to wine grapes for juice. Tasting Pinot noir grape juice, it’s like, ‘Whoa,’” Harbertson said, adding it can have a strawberry-like flavor with earthy notes.

Varnum Vintners also makes grape juices such as Riesling, which has stonefruit tones.

An expression of purity

Cyler Varnum worried about creating a compelling and great tasting wine without alcohol.

Before making his own NA product, he tried 150 NA wines from other companies, including those made without alcohol to begin with.

He found most unappealing and decided to dealcoholize Varnum Vintners’ base wines — removing the alcohol would simply be an additional step.

“For me, it was an expression of purity,” Cyler Varnum said.

The Varnums contracted with a firm to use a spinning cone column, a machine that spreads wine into a very thin film and boils out alcohol.

That equipment, made in Australia, is expensive and takes a year to build. Experts said larger wineries may be better suited to invest in the technology.

Cyler Varnum said he continues to pursue other equipment options and NA winemaking methods.

Gallup poll details drinking decline

According to Gallup, the percentage of U.S. adults who say they consume alcohol fell to a record-low 54% in 2025 as health concerns surged.

The drop coincides with “recent research indicating that any level of alcohol consumption may negatively affect health. This has been a sharp reversal from previous recommendations that moderate drinking could offer some protective benefits,” a Gallup report stated.

Young adults are more likely to believe no amount of alcohol is safe, and are less likely to report drinking alcohol.

“Compounding the challenge for companies that sell alcohol, drinkers now appear to be dialing back how much they drink, as well,” the Gallup report adds.



▲ Varnum Vintners released its first non-alcoholic wines in 2022. — Courtesy Varnum Vintners

Other tactics to deal with anti-alcohol movement

The wine industry is helping businesses develop communications strategies to discuss alcohol and health.

Jessica Mozeico, president of Et Fille Wines in Newberg, Ore., will moderate a discussion on the anti-alcohol movement during the Oregon Wine Symposium on Feb. 3 in Portland.

Mozeico said some alcohol studies were flawed and later revised to show moderate benefits to drinking — garnering far less headlines — or were determined by numerous U.S. officials to be biased.

Harbertson, from WSU, said risks with wine are relatively minor and similar to everyday activities such as driving a car or crossing the street.

U.S. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. recently urged Americans to drink less, but in a vague way with no measurements.

In the same press conference, Mehmet Oz, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, noted the social role of alcohol in bringing people together.

Mozeico said loneliness is a health problem, and gathering and sharing a bottle was essential to the wine experience.

“It seems as though that’s happening less frequently,” she added.

NA offerings, though a reasonable approach, don’t address wine’s cultural and social role moving forward, Mozeico said.

“That’s really the fundamental question,” she added. »

Experts said a few Pacific Northwest wineries are making non-alcoholic wines to diversify and boost bottom lines, and more are expected to join the segment. The shift to NA wines is a response to beliefs that drinking alcohol is unhealthy, and comes as the wine industry is facing disinterest and oversupply.



▲ Joanna Engel, of Union Wine Company, pours a sample of Underwood Rose Bubbles non-alcoholic wine during the Sip & Savor series. — Kyle Odegard photo



▲ Bottles of Brew Dr. Kombucha chill in a bucket at the Sip & Savor series. — Kyle Odegard photo

Losing youngest, best potential consumers

There's no question, however, that wine drinking has declined.

Ari Walker, president of Integrated Beverage Group, which is headquartered in Dundee, Ore, and owns Duck Pond Cellars, Firesteed, Rascal and Ransom labels, said per capita consumption of wine is down 20% compared to 2020.

Distributor depletions dropped 16% in 2025, he said, citing industry monitor SipSource.

"It's a tough time in the wine industry," Walker said.

Integrated Beverage Group also makes Dhōs Spirits, which don't contain alcohol.

Walker stopped drinking in 2012, then spent a half-decade trying to figure out how to make top-tier NA craft spirits before launching Dhōs.

"There wasn't anybody else doing it in 2018, at least stateside," Walker said.

His company surveyed 3,500 former wine drinkers, finding that 80% were 35 years old or younger, Walker said.

Those consumers were less likely to be influenced by price points and were highly motivated by certifications such as the Clean Label Project due to concerns regarding contaminants.

"The industry is losing our youngest and our best consumers," Walker said.

Walker said the future of wine is competing with other beverages and psychoactive substances while being more creative and attuned to what customers want.

"What wins with young consumers is going to be so different. ... The industry is going to change in ways that are unpredictable," he added.

The core customer remains the same

The Varnums expected to see an uptick in young customers with NA wines, but the main buyers remained their core demographic — enthusiasts aged 44-62.

Those customers are getting older and developing health issues that make it difficult to imbibe.

Or perhaps they're serving as a designated driver or looking to slow down their intake.

Taralyn Varnum said many NA craft drinkers are slightly damp as compared to completely dry.

Walker said only 12% of Dhōs customers identify as sober.

With NA offerings, residents can partake in beverage "rituals," including socializing at scenic locations and drinking something that looks identical to what their friends and family are having, Taralyn Varnum said.

The romance factor of wine country

The idea of visiting wineries isn't based on having an alcoholic product, said Sip & Savor speakers.

"It's about bringing people into this beautiful region," said Clive Pursehouse, U.S. editor of Decanter Magazine.

He described tasting rooms with views of clouds sitting in Douglas fir stands. "It's hard to beat the romance factor of wine country," he added.

Pursehouse said it was important for wineries to offer NA options, preferably wine, even if they don't produce them.

Taralyn Varnum said very few Oregon tasting rooms were doing that yet.

Brooks Wine doesn't make NA wines but offers quality options, including a NA flight, to be welcoming to visitors, said Jen Cossey, general manager.

Segment will sort into 'first-best-cheapest'

While there are centuries of winemaking tradition, NA wine remains in an early phase.

Joanna Engel, associate winemaker for Union Wine Company of Tualatin, Ore., which makes canned wines under the Underwood label, said NA wine was an important innovation area.

The market would force better offerings that taste more like traditional wine, she added.



▲ Jessica Mozeico, co-founder of Et Fille Wines, was the moderator at a discussion on the anti-alcohol movement during the February Oregon Wine Symposium in Portland. — Courtesy Carolyn Wells-Kramer

Matt Thomas, founder of Brew Dr. Kombucha, made in Tualatin, Ore., predicted the segment will sort into “first-best-cheapest” choices.

That pattern emerged with NA kombucha and beer markets.

For example, Athletic was the first NA beer brand to gain widespread acceptance, craft brewers are trying to stake their claim as the best, and global conglomerates are producing low cost options.

Thomas expects a NA wine from the Willamette Valley will become the first to achieve national footing.

“From my perspective, Underwood seems to be moving toward that first advantage. It’s great to see a brand out of Oregon in that position,” he said.

Gaining acceptance for NA wines

Pursehouse, of Decanter Magazine, acknowledged resistance in the sometimes stodgy wine world.

His London-based magazine isn’t reviewing NA wines at the moment but is creating a new category for the Decanter World Wine Awards.

“It’s a very important thing for us to build out and tackle,” Pursehouse said.

He added it was critical to create new criteria for NA wines, as some traditional sensory descriptors don’t apply.

Experts said that while NA wines are different, quality offerings from Varnum Vintners are leading to greater acceptance.

Pursehouse sampled Varnum wines after the Jan. 10 Sip & Savor discussion, inhaling aromas before tasting.

“These are really good,” he said, paused, and took another sip. ■

Kyle Odegard is a reporter at Capital Press.

Food Share of Lincoln County responds to swelling demands

Food Share of Lincoln County (FSLC) distributes bulk food supplies from their warehouse to the food pantries, meal sites, and libraries of coastal Lincoln County. This year, their network felt the crunch when grocery prices and support demand ticked up, yet new federal laws reduced the accessibility of food. A Roundhouse Foundation food purchase grant enabled FSLC to initiate their first direct-to-distributor food purchase order to restock their county quickly.



Learn more about Food Share of Lincoln County's growing needs and expansion on their website, <https://foodsharelc.org>

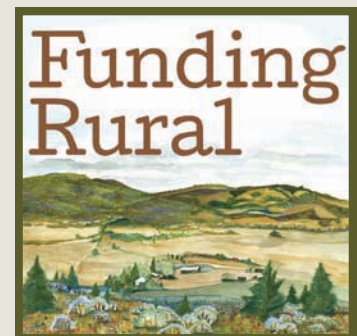


They collaborated with two other Oregon food banks to increase purchasing power and make that large purchase possible. Currently operating out of a 3,000 square foot facility, FSLC purchased a 12,000 square foot dairy distribution facility in 2024, with plans to fundraise and renovate the space, which RHF also supported. Once complete, this new hub will position FSLC to meet the growing demand in Lincoln County, especially with increased distribution of fresh produce.



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THE CULTURE

CANOE CRAFTED AT WALLOWA LAKE

STORY & PHOTOS
BY BILL BRADSHAW



It's a labor of love — but it's definitely labor.

Robert Fossek II has been carving a dugout canoe at Wallowa Lake to strengthen the connection between the Cayuse, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Nez Perce, Palus and other interrelated bands of the Columbia Basin and to reconnect them with their ancestral waterways and cultural sites.

The Wildhorse Foundation provided an \$18,000 grant for the project.

Fossek is relatively new to canoe-building, getting assistance from experienced canoe-builders in the Spokane, Washington, area.

"This is only my second canoe, so I'm still learning," he said between strokes of an adze.

Fossek and his partner, Brosnan Spencer, co-manage the Cove-based Caretakers of the Land, a grassroots organization fiscally sponsored through the Episcopal Diocese of Eastern Oregon that received the Wildhorse grant for Mid-Columbia River-Style Canoe Carving and Water-Based Immersions. Fossek is a member of the Walla Walla band. Spencer is Cayuse and a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Together they have a 14-year-old daughter.

Fossek said he got the idea for the canoe from his grandmother, who didn't want such crafts to be lost to the younger generations. He said she and other tribal elders want to see such crafts survive.

Fossek said he is crafting the canoe from a 120-year-old cottonwood tree felled

in the Wallowa Lake State Park.

"It's probably older than the state park," he said. "We asked the state park if they had any that were marked to come down."

The Wildhorse grant helped pay for tools for the project, such as adzes, drawknives, hatchets, chisels and other hand tools. While they primarily use those hand tools, a power tool such as a chain saw occasionally is called upon to fell the tree or cut major sections.

"To be able to financially support some of the few makers of handcrafted carving tools as well as regional suppliers of paddle gear through this grant already feels great," Fossek said. "To be able to have all the tools we need to sculpt a functional piece of art from a tree and to paddle it together safely and with quality gear feels like a true blessing that will really carry us forward."



▲ Robert Fossek II chops at a cottonwood log he's carving into a canoe Wallowa Lake as part of a grant-funded project.

The Wildhorse grant helped pay for tools for the project, such as adzes, drawknives, hatchets, chisels and other hand tools. While they primarily use those hand tools, a power tool such as a chain saw occasionally is called upon to fell the tree or cut major sections.



▲ Robert Fossek II uses an adze on a cottonwood log he's carving into a canoe as part of a project to strengthen the connection between interrelated Native bands of the Columbia Basin and to reconnect them with their ancestral waterways and cultural sites.



▲ A large stump is all that remains of the 120-year-old cottonwood tree at Wallowa Lake State Park that was harvested to carve an Indigenous canoe.

These tools are all steel, unlike the stone tools Fossek's ancestors relied upon. In precolonial times, before the tribes could trade for steel tools, they used stone tools made of basalt, obsidian — “or anything that would keep an edge,” he said.

Fossek was working Feb. 23 on the bow and carving its contours. He said the sides will be carved to leave a gunwale and its outside will be sealed with pine pitch and linseed oil. He said he's been working on this canoe since early January and expects it to be ready to launch in mid-March.

This particular canoe is expected to mostly be used on Wallowa Lake, though it also could sail traditional ancestral waters of the Columbia and Snake rivers. Fossek said he hopes to have a covered area — possibly at the state park — to display the canoe when it's not in use. He anticipates it will be used for educational purposes for young people to learn how their ancestors lived. For more information about the Wildhorse Foundation, visit thewildhorsefoundation.com. ■

Bill Bradshaw is a reporter for the Wallowa County Chieftain.

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