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Ag campaign planned

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By **ED MERRIMAN**

Baker City Herald

Groups representing 20 commodities, ranging from cattle, wheat and grass seed to poultry, vegetables and fruit, are joining to produce one of the first industry-wide campaigns promoting awareness of issues facing Oregon's farmers and ranchers.

"This is an exciting time for agriculture. We are seeing a unity that hasn't always been there across commodity lines," said Geoff Horning, executive director of the Agri-Business Council of Oregon.

"We are facing some complex issues in a very challenging environment. Farmers and ranchers are concerned about the long-term future of agriculture in Oregon, as far as being a sustainable economic industry," Horning said.

"We are looking to develop a campaign to educate and engage urban Oregonians about some of the key ag issues in our state," Horning said.

The Agri-Business Council announced the results of a survey last week that Horning said will be used as a baseline for designing a multi-year, multi-media campaign designed to raise awareness among urban residents of issues that affect the future of agriculture in Oregon.

For the survey, 500 people along the I-5 corridor from Portland to Ashland, and in Bend, Hermiston and Pendleton, were contacted by telephone by the firm of Conkling, Fiskum and McCormick.

Horning said the survey asked respondents a variety of questions related to seven key issues facing Oregon's agricultural industry, including sustainability, pesticides, water quantity and quality, energy and fuel, labor, the urban-rural interface and food safety.

"I think what maybe surprised most of us is there is probably a better understanding of ag issues by urban Oregonians than we thought," Horning said.

"The soccer moms and the morning commuters understand that it is not just their wallets that are being hit by high fuel costs," Horning said. "They understand the high cost of fuel and energy is affecting production costs on farms and ranches, and the cost of food in the grocery store."

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Horning said Northeastern Oregon communities, except Pendleton and Hermiston, were not included in the survey because the campaign is proposed to target urban audiences.

"It wasn't because we think any less of our friends in Northeastern Oregon. "We know folks in rural areas like Baker, La Grande and Ontario have a larger understanding of agriculture than folks in some of our urban areas," Horning said.

The survey was conducted in May, the initial results were received in June and the Agri-Business Council and the 20 commodity groups are analyzing the results, he said.

"At this point we are still trying to dissect the results of the survey and trying to determine our next course of action," Horning said.

Survey results will also be used as a measuring point to assess the effectiveness of the campaign. Horning said the initial investment from the 20 agricultural groups covered the \$22,000 cost of the survey.

However, Horning said it will probably cost a minimum of \$500,000 a year to wage an effective multi-media campaign with educational materials developed for placement in grocery stores, along with ads for television, radio and newspapers.

Horning speculates that the campaign could cost in excess of \$2 million over four or five years, although he said decisions about the content and funding for the campaign will be made later by the Agri-Business Council's board of directors and leaders of the 20 commodity groups, and others yet to commit to the industry-wide effort.

Both the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and the Oregon Beef Council are involved, as are the Oregon Seed Council and the Oregon Wheat Growers League, Horning said.

Other partners providing funding include the Agricultural Cooperative Council of Oregon, Cal-Gon Farms, CoBank, Oregon Association of Nurseries, Oregon Dairy Products Commission, Oregon Fairs Association, Oregon Farm Bureau Federation, Oregon Fryer Commission, Oregon Raspberry/Blackberry Commission, Oregon State University College of Agriculture, Oregon Strawberry Commission, Oregon Sweet Cherry Commission, Oregon Wine Growers Association, Oregonians for Food & Shelter, Pear Bureau Northwest and the Oregon Pork Producers.

"This is not an ABC campaign, this is truly one of the first industry-wide campaigns that has been put together," Horning said.

Given the growing public concern about food safety and support for "buy local" campaigns, as confirmed by the survey, Horning said there's a growing concern that if the buy local concept is pushed too far, it could have devastating effects on the state's agricultural industry, which exports 85 percent of everything grown here.

"It is great to buy local, but we also need to support global exports," Horning said. "The ability to market Oregon products worldwide is critical to the economic viability of Oregon agriculture.

"Getting that message across would definitely be one of the goals of the campaign," Horning said. "We are just wanting to make sure that there are not rules and regulations put in place that stifle the ability of Oregon farmers and ranchers to do business on a global level."

"We are managing the day-to-day of it, but we are seeking guidance and council from all of our partners," Horning said. "It is important, for this campaign to be successful, that we hear all of the voices and



thoughts from our partners," Horning said.

Among survey responses, 26 percent chose technology as the state's leading industry, while 18 percent picked agriculture as No. 1.

Almost half of respondents (45 percent) picked the soaring cost of energy and fuel as the biggest challenges to successfully running a farm or ranch, and 13 percent chose availability of land and water as the biggest challenges to ag, followed by 10 percent citing transportation, and 9 percent citing land and water availability.

"They view agriculture, outside of maybe tech, as probably the most important economic factor in the state," Horning said, adding that out of the top 10 industries listed in the survey, respondents ranked lumber production, which was the state's No. 1 industry for decades prior to the 1990s, in the middle of the pack.

A whopping 90 percent of survey respondents connected rising costs for fuel and petroleum-based farm inputs to rising food prices, which have increased 5 percent over the past year. Other factors cited as contributing to higher food prices included loss of agricultural land and a growing world population.

Horning said one of the most encouraging messages from the survey is that most Oregonians respect the commitment of farmers and ranchers to food safety, quality and sustainable practices.

"The survey shows that Oregonians do respect agriculture," Horning said.

For more information about the survey or the Agri-Business Council (ABC) visit www.aglink.org.

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