

Oregonians generally feel good about ag, but public needs to be educated on key issues

Oregon agriculture learns from public image survey

July 16, 2008... Oregonians generally consider farming and ranching to be very important to Oregon's economy and recognize many of the challenges facing agriculture today. That overall positive public feeling can help the industry position itself on several key issues in the near future, according to preliminary results of a recently conducted public opinion survey.

"The results tell me that most Oregonians want to support agriculture and feel a real connection with the industry," says Katy Coba, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "There is plenty of room for improvement in specific areas of farming and ranching. But overall, this survey encourages the notion that Oregonians want to be good neighbors and partners with our industry."

The snapshot of public opinion is the result of a telephone survey of 500 Oregonians recently conducted on behalf of the Agri-Business Council of Oregon, which had the financial support of numerous agriculture organizations. Questions were directed at residents of six markets— Portland metro, Salem, Eugene, Ashland/Medford, Bend, and Pendleton/Hermiston. The firm of Conkling, Fiskum & McCormick conducted the survey.

Among the key findings of the survey:

- **Agriculture is recognized as an important contributor to Oregon's economy.** Respondents were given seven major industries to consider as most important to the state's economy. Technology was ranked first with 26 percent of the respondents choosing it number one, but agriculture (18 percent) had the second highest total of respondents choosing it the most important industry, followed by health care, forest products, and tourism. Not surprisingly, the Pendleton/Hermiston area rated the importance of agriculture higher than the other survey locations.

- **Energy and fuel prices challenge farmers and ranchers.** Respondents indicate an understanding that commuters aren't the only ones being hit with higher fuel prices. According to the survey, the cost of fuel and energy (45 percent) is by far the biggest challenge to successfully running a farm or ranch, ahead of such challenges as availability of land and water (13 percent), transportation costs (10 percent), government regulations (9 percent), and the cost and availability of labor (9 percent).

- **Fuel costs impact food prices.** With the average price of food in the U.S. increasing five percent this past year, Oregonians appear to make the connection with energy and fuel price increases faced by agriculture. In the survey, 90 percent of the respondents say oil and gas prices have had the most significant impact on food price increases, but also note loss of agricultural land, growing world population, and higher costs to raise crops and animals as contributors to food price increases.

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- **Sustainability is not just energy and recycling.** The definition of sustainability certainly varies by individual or organization, but 58 percent of the respondents agree that agriculture uses sustainable business practices in its operations. Among the statements offered in the survey that best describe sustainability in agriculture— growing crops that can be sold and used locally, contributing to the health of the community, using energy efficient farming techniques, monitoring water use, operating a farm to pass from one generation to the next, and caring for farm animals and livestock.

- **Urban sprawl threatens farming operations.** More than half of the respondents say they are very concerned about the conversion of farmland to residential and industrial uses. When given a list of seven major concerns about agriculture, loss of farmland is ranked the highest.

- **Concerns about food safety are high.** Nearly two in three respondents say they are very or somewhat concerned about food safety with meat, dairy, and produce purchased at the grocery store. On the plus side, 71 percent agree that food products produced on American farms are safer than similar items imported from other countries. The survey was conducted prior to the recent salmonella outbreak centered on tomatoes.

While the survey results seem to show general support for agriculture among Oregonians, there are challenges in specific areas such as pesticide use and water quantity issues. Even so, respondents believe agriculture should be given a high priority for water resources. After water for human consumption, 64 percent of the respondents say farms and ranches should be at the top of the list to irrigate crops and water livestock. That greatly outpaces the second ranked priority of water for fish and wildlife, at 26 percent.

"In a state like Oregon where the urban population is growing so rapidly, it is vital for agriculture to keep a finger on the public pulse and knowing how Oregonians feel about farming and ranching," says Coba. "I am pleased that the industry has supported this survey effort and hope it will continue in the future."

Agricultural organizations are still waiting to pour over details of the survey. The findings will not just end up collecting dust on the shelf, but will help guide the industry and specific commodity groups as they develop messages for the future.

"This survey shows that Oregonians do respect agriculture," says Geoff Horning, executive director of the Agri-Business Council. "It's an industry with challenges and we're working in a very complex environment. But it appears Oregonians do appreciate the efforts of farmers and ranchers to manage a sustainable industry. We will use this survey to gain a better understanding of what our customers want. In this case, we are talking about urban Oregonians. They are the majority of the state's population and, of course, the ones that were targeted in this survey effort."

A number of positive images and perceptions of Oregon agriculture already exist. The survey suggests those can lay the foundation for a better understanding of what the industry needs to remain viable in Oregon.

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