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Friday, August 08, 2008

8/8/2008 6:00:00 AM

Public likes what it sees in Ore. farmers

Survey says ag viewed favorably, for the most part

Mitch Lies
Capital Press

THE DALLES, Ore. - The first step in improving public perceptions of agriculture is complete.

Based on answers to a survey, Oregon agriculture now knows where to focus.

"This was the easy part," said Geoff Horning, executive director of Agri-Business Council of Oregon.

The next step - conducting a public relations campaign and swaying opinion - stands to be more difficult, Horning said.

But agriculture seems to be on the right track.

"I think generally the survey showed that people are supportive of agriculture and that there are a couple of areas where we need to do a better job of educating the general public," Oregon State Board of Agriculture Chairman Ken Bailey said.

Horning aired the results of ABC's Oregon agriculture public opinion survey at a State Board of Agriculture meeting here July 31.

In addition to shaping a public relations campaign, the survey could be used as a backdrop for developing policy.

In the telephone survey, residents of Oregon's most populated cities were asked questions such as:

- What are the challenges facing agriculture?
- Should farmers change their practices?
- Are government restrictions on pesticide use adequate?
- Are agricultural practices sustainable?
- Is U.S. food safer than food from other countries?
- Are Oregon farmers efficiently using water?
- Are Oregon farmers knowingly hiring illegal labor?

The survey was coordinated by the Agri-Business Council of Oregon and conducted by a Portland public relations firm.

Among key findings Horning highlighted July 31 were:

- Agriculture is favorably perceived;
- Agriculture is thought of as an important industry in Oregon;
- Opportunities exist to improve public perception.

In his report to the board, Horning said urban residents ranked agriculture as the second most important industry in Oregon behind technology. And, he said, many residents believe the financial outlook for agriculture will decline in coming years.

"This could give us an opportunity to get some support in Salem and elsewhere in the future," he said.

On the down side, in the area of crop protection, Horning noted in several cities, respondents said government restrictions on pesticide use was "not strong enough." In Portland, Eugene, Medford and Ashland, the "not strong enough" response was the number one response, ranking ahead of "about right."

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Survey respondents in three major Oregon cities said government restrictions on pesticide use were "not strong enough" in an Agri-Business Council of Oregon survey. Overall, agriculture fared well in the survey. - Capital Press file photo

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"Outside of labor, this is the one topic we need to do a better job of educating urban Oregonians about our practices and why we do what we do," Horning said.

Most respondents indicated in the survey they believe farmers knowingly hire illegal labor.

Another response Horning emphasized was in regard to public perception of food processors. When asked what part of food production creates the biggest risk to food safety, 62 percent of the respondents selected "the food processors."

By comparison, the second biggest risk point, according to respondents, was "the person who cooks the food," which drew 14 percent of the answers.

In all, 500 urban residents completed the survey, including 150 in the Portland Metro area, 75 each in Salem, Eugene, Ashland/Medford and Bend, and 50 in the Pendleton/Hermiston area.

An oversight committee is preparing to meet next week, Horning said, to start developing a public relations campaign using the survey's responses as direction.

The committee is scheduled to prioritize key issues, identify target audiences and look for funds.

ABC plans to come back in two years - after its public relations campaign - with another survey to see if public perception has improved.

Tammy Dennee, executive director of the Oregon Wheat Growers League, said the survey also can be used to shape public policy.

"We have a daunting task to not only help the general public understand agriculture, but also help legislators," Dennee said.

In the meantime, other than in a few problem areas, Horning said public perception of agriculture in Oregon is pretty good.

"I was very pleased and encouraged by the results of this survey on several fronts," Horning said.

"It turned out way better than I thought it would for agriculture, especially the water part," board member Doug Kraemer said. "It showed they recognize the fact we need water and that we're efficiently using water."

"I think agriculture came out pretty well," board Chairman Bailey said. "Some numbers are not what we would like, but I think that just means we need to do a better job in those areas of educating people about what we are doing and why we are doing it."

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