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Ag groups accomplish more together

When agriculture speaks with one voice, it has a better chance of being heard.

For that reason, a recent survey about Oregon agriculture will go a long way in helping to create strong messages to consumers.

Some of the messages will be countering negative perceptions the public has about agriculture; other messages will reinforce and build on positive images that are already out there.

Oregon's Agri-Business Council, with the help of its Keeping Ag Viable committee, invited and united many different organizations and individuals within agriculture in the state to help with this initiative. While there may have been opportunities in the past for people to work together on common ground, this survey highlights some new ground where ag groups can work together.

Money has been received from many groups, as well as an individual farm, so an extensive telephone survey could be done by Conkling, Fiskum and McCormick, Inc.

Calls were made in May to people in several urban areas of Oregon, east and west of the mountains, on such areas as urban/rural interface, sustainability, crop protection, food safety, water, labor and energy.

While some of the results of the survey are being discussed publicly, the survey results will mainly be released to organizations that helped finance it.

Recently, the groups received a report on the results; the next step will be forming committees to work on messages, then a campaign constructed within the next few months to deliver the messages to the public.

Some of the key findings included that agriculture is well-liked and favorably perceived; people also recognize it is important in its contributions to the economy.

Eighteen percent of people felt ag was the most important industry in the state; only technology, with 26 percent of people choosing it number one, was seen as a bigger contributor.

It was encouraging to see that consumers understood how much energy and fuel prices affect agriculture and are some of the biggest challenges - 90 percent also said that those things also affect higher food prices. Availability of land and water, transportation costs, government regulations and the cost and availability of labor also were seen as challenges.

Sustainability is always a word that people, even within the ag community, struggle to define.

The survey asked questions to see how consumers see it, and discovered that 58 percent of the people polled felt ag uses sustainable business practices.

The survey revealed that Oregon's urban population cares about what happens to farmland and agriculture: More than half are concerned about urban sprawl, and they showed strong support for water going to crops and animals rather than residential neighborhoods, fish and wildlife, or recreation.

The last few months have had several high-profile cases of food-borne illnesses, and the survey reflected that: 63 percent of people said they are very or somewhat concerned about food safety, although more than 70 percent did believe meat, dairy and produce on American farms are safer than imported foods.

There were other interesting results in the survey that will help stir discussions within the agricultural community, but better yet, will help to focus efforts on where to go next. Promotional campaigns will be needed - and must continue into the future to have an impact.

Resources will be needed for the campaigns. A wider range of agricultural organizations and individuals will be approached to be involved and help support the efforts, whether financially or in other ways.

In 2009, the sesquicentennial year of Oregon's statehood, it's appropriate that the ag community will turn a new chapter to get people to return to understand and appreciate its important agricultural roots.

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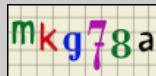
For agriculture to remain viable, two things are needed. First, the practice of farming has to change to become compatible with densely populated areas, and second, the industry needs to attract new talent. As co-author of SPIN-Farming, what I see every day are more and more first generation throughout the U.S. and Canada using SPIN's franchise-ready system as an entry point into the profession. Developed by Canadian farmer Wally Satezewich, SPIN is a vegetable farming system that makes it possible to earn \$50,000+ from a half acre. SPIN farmers utilize relay cropping to increase yield and achieve good economic returns by growing only the most profitable food crops tailored to local markets. SPIN's growing techniques are not, in themselves, breakthrough. What is novel is the way a SPIN farm business is run. SPIN provides everything you'd expect from a good franchise: a business plan, marketing advice, and a detailed day-to-day workflow. In standardizing the system and creating a reproducible process it really isn't any different from McDonalds. By offering a non-technical, easy-to-understand and inexpensive-to-implement farming system, it allows many more people to farm, wherever they live, as long as there are nearby markets to support them, and it removes the two big barriers to entry – sizeable acreage and significant start-up capital. By using front lawns and backyards and neighborhood lots as their land base, they are recasting farming as a small business in cities and towns, helping to "right sizing" agriculture for an urbanized century and making local food production a viable business proposition once again.

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