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Opinion

Organic farming best option for rural economies

By Stacy Kraker

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There are a variety of approaches we could take to boost the economy of Oregon's rural counties. We can look back, and try to recapture a fragment of Oregon's old economy based on resource extraction, or we can look forward to more stable and sustainable opportunities.

Organic agriculture and commerce is one such opportunity; however, the clean air, water, and soil needed for this industry to flourish are threatened by Oregon's "weakest in the West" environmental rules. New research shows why Oregon should embrace organics and ensure that organic farming can be a big part of our state's future.

Unfortunately, the rear-view mirror vision often presented by Oregon's industry and policy leaders overlooks diverse, vibrant and modern economic drivers, such as organic farming and the organic trade. Instead, the focus is often on a return to industrial forestry and mass clear-cutting practices whose harm outstrips the potential economic benefits.

A recent Environmental Protection Agency report shows that one-half of Oregon's 10 biggest polluters are in the wood products industry. According to the director of Oregon's Office of Economic Analysis, "even if we went back to peak harvest of the '70s, we'd only have one-third of the workers in the mill as we did in previous years, due to technology alone."

The organic industry provides a stunning contrast. Nationwide, organic food sales in 2015 jumped by 11 percent to almost \$40 billion, far outpacing the 3 percent growth rate for the overall food market. Oregon companies such as Mountain Rose Herbs, Organically Grown Co., and Hummingbird Wholesale are just a few clear examples of how organic businesses can benefit local economies, while supporting high-quality jobs in organic agriculture.

Research published by the Organic Trade Association in May 2016, from Penn State agricultural economist Dr. Edward Jaenicke, shows that supporting the growth of organic businesses can be a major boon to rural economies. Jaenicke's research links economic health at the county level to

organic agriculture, and shows that "organic food and crop production -- and the business activities accompanying organic agriculture -- creates real and long-lasting regional economic opportunities."

Most importantly: Counties within organic "hot spots" have lower poverty rates and higher median annual household incomes. On average, poverty rates drop by 1.3 percentage points and median income rises by more than \$2,000 in these counties. The same benefits are not found in general agricultural hot spots.

Clearly, organics can and do benefit Oregon's economy, but the organic trade relies on organic agriculture, and organic agriculture depends on clean water and air.

Industrial clear-cutting practices, such as aerial herbicide spraying, threaten both the economic potential of organics and the health of our state. Herbicides that drift onto neighboring properties during routine timberland aerial spraying are a direct threat to small organic farms and businesses.

Many would-be organic farmers simply cannot afford to risk their farm becoming contaminated with Atrazine or Glyphosate by neighboring corporate landowners, which may necessitate the loss of their crop and the associated investments and income.

Protecting the environment has benefits far beyond nurturing a successful organic industry. People want to live, work and grow in places with drinkable water, breathable air and a sustainable future. Lawmakers in Oregon should take meaningful steps to protect people, farms, and drinking water. Gov. Kate Brown deserves recognition for committing to working hard for rural Oregon's economies; let's also talk more about empowering communities with innovative organic ideas supported by data and science, in line with modern values.

After all, what could be better for Oregon than growing more good clean food, and protecting clean, pure water for us all?

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