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# Guest column: Farms are on the brink of collapse

BY CATE HAVSTAD and CHRIS CASAD

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Casad and Havstad

Submitted photo

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## Editor's Note

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I once heard a story of a man who saw a horse dead in a field. The horse's owner explained, "I was teaching my horse not to eat. Each day I fed it a little less. I had just about reached the point where I didn't need to feed it at all! Just one more day, and I would have gotten him down to not eating anything at all, but alas, he up and died."

Just as horses cannot survive on less food than is needed to sustain life, so too crops cannot grow with less water than is required. Instead, farmers are forced to leave land fallow so that they can provide adequate water needed for crops on the land that they are able to cultivate.

Farmers in Jefferson County find themselves in an analogous position to other businesses in Bend, Portland and throughout the state. Lack of water for crops, this year and last, has caused them to leave 30% to 40% of their fields unplanted, much like a brick -and -mortar shop closing its doors for months on end.

The pandemic has revealed the interconnectedness of our lives. We are connected at all scales, from the family unit to the global commons. From Asia to Europe to Central and South America, Jefferson County grows and provides vegetable seed for farmers around the world. Those farmers help nourish their communities and keep local economies humming along. From farmers markets to supermarkets, our urban and rural lives intersect through the literal flow of water in rivers and through the virtual flow of water in food.

The pandemic has also revealed fragilities. Over the past several months, businesses that rely on a functioning society have been shuttered, and many are at risk of never reopening their doors. Like Jefferson County farmers, very few small businesses can survive a sustained drop in business whether month after month or year after year.

Most of the water Jefferson County farmers use in the growing season comes from water captured in Wickiup Reservoir during the winter months. In 2015, the North Unit Irrigation District (the district that provides water to Jefferson County farms), voluntarily agreed to permanently leave an additional 80 cubic feet per second in the Upper Deschutes during the winter months.

Jefferson County farmers know that their crops need water just as businesses need customers walking through their doors. Their lives and livelihoods revolve around this fact. They know that the water they need comes from rivers, and that rivers also need water. Decades of water scarcity has forced NUID farmers to be leaders in agricultural water conservation. As such, they provide a model for other districts throughout Oregon to emulate, for the sake of farms and rivers.

But right now, the situation for Jefferson County farmers is dire. As with any small business, successive months or years of drought, literal or figurative, is not survivable. Further, a 30% to 40% cut to farmers agricultural output, like any cut to local commerce at that scale, has an amplifier effect in the wrong direction. It puts all of Jefferson County at risk of economic collapse with ripple effects throughout Central Oregon. Keep in mind that fields, even fallow, require time, energy and investment. Mortgage payments must be paid, taxes must be paid, weeds and vegetation must be controlled, insects, rodents and disease must be controlled, and the list goes on.

So too, NUID farmers need help now to make sure they survive the drought and receive adequate water for their crops this year.

Who are Jefferson County farmers? They grow the food and seed you buy at the market or in packets at the gardening shop. They are the stewards of the land and water. They fish and recreate on rivers. They are parents and grandparents. They are Central Oregonians. They are your neighbors.

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Cate Havstad and Chris Casad live in Madras.

