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# WHEAT FACTS

Oregon is the 14th largest wheat producing state in the U.S. and the state's second more valuable agriculture export. Production of wheat supports nearly 5,624 full or part-time jobs on about 2,000 farms, according to Oregon State Extension Service.

Wheat covers about 797,000 acres in Oregon and farmers produce about 29.9 million bushels of the grain each year, for an annual dollar value of \$320.6 million. The state exports about 90 percent of its soft white wheat — used for cookies, cakes and pastries — primarily to the major markets of Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Yemen and Indonesia, reports the Oregon Wheat Commission.

In Umatilla, Morrow, Sherman and Gilliam counties, OSU estimates that 2,600 jobs are created by wheat growers, who harvest about 632,000 acres.

*Photo courtesy Judy von Borstel  
Cover photo courtesy Shelby von Borstel*

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# FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

By RaeLynn Ricarte

In 1916, Carsten von Borstel built a five-bedroom house for his bride, Margaretha, and their growing family in Sherman County at a cost of \$1,600; money they made by hauling wheat to market in Kent via a wagon pulled by a horse team.

The von Borstels sold their grain for \$3.18 per bushel, only \$1.67 less than their great-grandson, Alan, gets today; despite the fact that production costs have risen dramatically through the decades.

For example, Alan and his wife Judy could now pay \$500,000 for a combine to harvest grain and a tractor, even used, as they buy equipment, runs \$150,000-\$250,000.

“My grandfather didn’t have to pay freight for having his wheat transported, but we do now, and the cost of fertilizers and fuel just keeps going up because of global demand,” said Alan.

He seldom hires laborers to help with his cattle and wheat operation to avoid spending valuable production time filling out reams of paperwork to satisfy state and federal agencies.

“The time I would have to sit at the computer would be time I wasn’t working in the field – and I already have long days as it is,” he said.

During the peak growing and harvest seasons, von Borstel works seven days a week, from sunrise to sunset, or sometimes after night has fallen.

“This is not an occupation, it’s a lifestyle,” he said.

He and Judy have acquired enough acreage for their wheat and cattle operation – they supplement their income by providing range for 60 pair (cow and calf) – that they rely on advances in technology to streamline duties.

The GPS (Global Positioning System) in their combine records the



Alan von Borstel sits in his combine with working dog “Tilly” on the family farm near Grass Valley. Von Borstel is the fourth generation to work the land and will one day be passing on the wheat and cattle operation to his son, Nick, who is currently a junior at Oregon State University.

*Contributed photo*

yield for every acre of crop land.

A map produced by a special software program allows von Borstel to see high yield zones where more fertilizer and seed would be beneficial, and locations where less will grow so it isn't profitable to invest as much time and materials.

The map not only pares down production costs, he said, but makes for a more environmentally-friendly operation since it records where areas have been sprayed, and where chemicals are needed, so there is minimal overlap.

Farm families who work the land for generations strive to be good stewards because they want to leave a profitable enterprise to the next generation, said von Borstel.

In addition, he said people who choose agriculture for a profession have a deep and abiding love of their way of life and the sense of peace it offers.

Von Borstel said, as new technology and science emerge, a farmer continually strives to find the balance between stewardship and production.

That becomes difficult, he said, when legislators and consumers don't understand how food is grown and the issues a farmer faces.

In south Sherman County, the ground is rocky with shallow soil. Optimizing wheat production is

challenging given that the crop is not irrigated and fields receive only about 11 inches of rainfall per year, or a third of that amount during a drought.

Like a growing number of farmers across the nation, von Borstel does not till the soil in preparation for the next planting cycle. By not breaking it up into finer particles, the dirt is less likely to be carried away by wind or water.

Not tilling the land also burns less fuel, which minimizes carbon emissions.

He said about 80 percent of Sherman County farmers follow that same practice. Not only does the stubble from last year's harvest help retain water, it provides ground cover that cuts back on weed growth and reduces erosion.

In addition, nutrients are fed back into the soil, lowering the levels of nitrogen that need to be applied to maximize growth.

Every wheat field on the von Borstel farm lays fallow after a year in productivity. New seeds and fertilizers are pushed through the ground cover using a no-till drill, and gradient terraces collect water and further decreases erosion.

"The more we learn, the better we get at doing farming in a sustainable way," said von Borstel.

He said consumers in the U.S. are

more interested in knowing where their food comes from now than at any other time in history, which creates its own challenges.

Because less than 2 percent of the nation's population is involved in the agriculture industry, he said a lot of misconceptions are pushed out through the media, which often does not investigate claims to get the facts right.

For example, he said there has been an outcry in urban areas against use of herbicides and pesticides on wheat, but fields become a mess of weeds without intervention. And that lowers the marketing potential of crops, which must be free of foreign materials to be shipped to Asia and other locations.

The irony of the situation is that small farms are being driven out of business by rules imposed by political pressure from urban dwellers, which had led to the growth of more giant corporations, something they also oppose.

Von Borstel grows wheat seeds for Mid-Columbia Producers and earns an extra 50 cents per bushel for his labor. He is not only required to keep weeds and other varieties of wheat out of those fields, but subject to multiple inspections each season by MCP and Oregon State University officials.

So exacting are the requirements

that von Borstel thoroughly cleans the combine when switching fields and has the family "rogueing," either riding on four-wheelers or walking to scout out invaders.

"I really hate goat grass," said daughter Jana of the hours spent scouting fields to see if the weed had invaded crop land.

Cattle are fenced on range lands and have very limited access to the rolling wheat fields.

"If our fields don't pass inspection, I lose the seed premium and get nothing for my extra effort and expense," said Alan of the need to scrupulously monitor production.

He said reports by environmental groups that farmers "drench" their fields with Monsanto's Roundup that is absorbed by the wheat are false. That would neither be necessary more economically feasible, according to von Borstel.

Herbicides are typically applied before, or shortly after, planting, about eight to nine months prior to harvest. Twenty-four ounces of Roundup covers an acre and the chemical does not saturate the soil, said von Borstel. Glyphosate (Roundup) is readily degraded by soil microbes.

"Roundup saves top soil because we don't have to till the fields," he said.

Roundup is applied to prevent





**Alan von Borstel believes it is time for the ag industry to begin telling its story to bridge the disconnect between people who live in cities and the 2 percent of the nation growing its food.** *Mark B. Gibson photo*

drift with a special nozzle that makes drops too large to blow in the wind. Mixing agents are added to Roundup to encapsulate the chemical so drops land where intended and do not drift to other locations.

Other herbicides and fungicides,

if needed, will be applied three to four months prior to harvest.

Von Borstel said weeds evolve as the strongest plants survive the application of an herbicide, so farmers may use mixes of different herbicides, such as 2,4-Dichlorophenoxy-

acetic acid, to help prevent resistant bio-types of weeds from developing.

What most people don't know, he said, is that the median lethal dose test of a toxin, known as Lethal Dose 50, shows that many of the herbicides that wheat farmers use are relatively safe. LD50 is the amount of an ingested substance that kills 50 percent of a test sample of rats. It is expressed in milligrams of substance per kilogram of body weight. The higher the LD50 number, the safer the product. An LD50 of Roundup is 4,900 mg/kg, while Tylenol is 338 mg/kg, bleach 192 mg/kg and household ammonia 350 mg/kg.

Two insecticides approved for use on organic farms weigh in with an LD50 rating much less safe than Roundup. Copper sulfate is 472 mg/kg and nicotine sulfate is 50 mg/kg.

"So much of the public doesn't want to believe science, they want to cherry pick what they believe," said Alan.

That is a big issue he said, because there are problems inherent with

each variety of wheat that, if not treated with chemicals, render the crop non-marketable.

For that reason, he said people should not oppose genetically modified varieties of commercially grown plants that increase their resistance to diseases and, thereby, reduce the need for application of chemicals.

"Is it better to make that plant resistant to bugs or spray that plant and feed it to you?" he asked.

While no wheat grown commercially in the U.S. is genetically modified, and currently most of the foreign countries importing our wheat don't want that type of grain, he still sees the need to continue doing research.

He said 85 percent of corn grown in the U.S. has been genetically modified to increase the yield and make plants more hardy, as has that same percentage of cotton. Plants can also be engineered to thrive on less water and better withstand cold, drought and poor soil conditions.

Modifications to golden rice that



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“What if we can modify a plant to help with cancer?” von Borstel asked. “Genetically modified plants can co-exist with those that haven’t been modified.”

He said organic farmers have connected more with the public, which has generated a negative response to traditional farming methods. But it is impossible to feed a global population that now stands at 7.49 billion and is estimated by the United Nations to reach 11.2 billion in 2100 through only organic practices.

“It simply can’t be done,” said von Borstel. “We need yield to feed the world.”

With more than 20,000 people a day dying of malnutrition around the world, he said farmers need to be growing as much as they can.

Peer reviewed science has shown that DNA from genetically modified and conventional crops can’t be transferred to humans and cause the birth defects and diseases as falsely claimed by opponents, said von Borstel.

There is a middle ground in farming that can accommodate production needs and the concerns of conservationists, he said.

For example, some of his family’s land is in the Conservation Reserve Program administered by the Farm Service Agency.

In exchange for a yearly rental payment, the von Borstels have agreed to leave environmentally sensitive land out of agriculture production and plant vegetation that will provide wildlife habitat, stop erosion and improve water quality.

Another myth that is passed among consumers, he said, is that wheat farmers are heavily subsidized by the government.

He said federal officials used to regulate production to great an even playing field in supply and demand by stopping excess surpluses or shortages.

Today, farmers buy crop insurance for years when there is a



**Judy von Borstel prepares to greet her husband after he returns home from a long day in the field — like most farmers, he typically works from dawn to dusk, she said.**

*Contributed photo*

natural disaster or the bottom drops out of the market. The premium is subsidized by the government to keep it affordable and based on a 10-year average of the farm’s yield.

Coverage is available for up to 85 percent of the crop, although the cost for that amount is too high for some producers, said von Borstel.

“The insurance is to keep you in business for another year, which provides the nation with food security,” he said.

The bottom line, said von Borstel, is that farmers across the U.S. are largely doing their best to adapt to changing times and supply food to the nation and beyond.

“What we are doing in farming today is sustainable and good,” he said.



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# THE HIGH COST OF HELPING HANDS

By RaeLynn Ricarte

**M**ichael Omeg believes the only thing more expensive than participating in the H-2A Temporary Agriculture Workers program is not having enough pickers to get cherries off the trees.

"I am spending millions to grow my crop and if I can't get the fruit off the trees, everything's lost," he said.

Omeg will be one of the first farmers in Wasco County to utilize H-2A, which is run through the U.S. Department of Labor. The program provides a path for foreign nationals, primarily from Mexico or Jamaica, to enter the United States for seasonal agriculture work.

"It's very difficult and expensive but, to me, it's worth it because we aren't able to get/recruit/find domestic workers to fill the gap," said Omeg. "When farmers go this route, there is a tremendous amount of red tape involved and it is very costly."

The H-2A program was established when a better economy in Latin America, and calls in Congress for immigration reform, began reducing the number of pickers coming over the border. The problem has been exacerbated, said Omeg, by the fact that fewer high school and college students are willing to work in the fields, despite their ability to earn \$22-\$24 per hour.

"Every year for the last five years there has been a shortage of workers in this county," he said.

Omeg is a fifth-generation farmer on Dry Hollow Lane who grows five varieties of sweet cherries. He needs 35 full-time employees and 300 seasonal workers to keep the operation running smoothly.

The reason that Omeg Family Orchards has been in existence more than a century is that the family has been willing to adapt to changing times, said Michael.

He and wife, Lindsay, a third-



**Michael Omeg describes how he is improving soil health during a workshop hosted by Oregon State University. He has invested in new machinery, including the blue mower in the background that throws cuttings to the side — under the trees where they will compost and add nutrients — in an effort to improve soil health on his farm. He also mulches branches pruned from his trees in the orchard, which helps the soil and also reduces labor costs. Below, Elio Andrader demonstrates the mower.**

*Mark B. Gibson photo*

grade teacher at Dry Hollow Elementary, hope to be able to pass the farm down to one or more of their four children.

With the Trump Administration focused on securing U.S. borders and deporting illegal aliens, Omeg and other farmers are worried the dwindling ranks of workers will be further thinned in 2017.

"It's easy to say 'Hire American' but that doesn't work in this industry," he said.

In addition to families being afraid to cross the border, he said those who do increasingly prefer other types of seasonal work, such as wildland firefighter or the service sector.



The Omegs have decided to go through the complex H-2A process, and pay the costs, to bring 12-20 workers to their farm later this year. These employees are expected to arrive in September, after harvest, to help with pruning and other work to wind down the growing season.

Omeg said H-2A works well for farmers he knows in Washington, which makes him optimistic, but the program isn't for the faint of heart.

"They (DOL) want to make H-2A workers less attractive than domestic workers so they make it extensive to go this route," he said.

To begin with, Omeg must advertise at the local, regional, state and national levels for domestic workers.

If that doesn't yield results, he will pay \$1,200 in fees and permits to the federal government for each worker requested.

The contract negotiated between him and a recruiting firm for each

seasonal employee requires that he pay for their transportation to and from their country of origin, about \$500 each way if they are from Mexico.

When they arrive in Wasco County, Omeg will be responsible to transport H-2A workers from their place of residence to his farm, and make sure they get into town a couple of times a week to shop and do laundry.

DOL requires that Omeg pay each H-2A worker the "Adverse Effect Wage Rate, which is set by DOL each year to ensure that domestic wages aren't being undercut.

DOL's wage rate for 2017 is \$13.38 per hour, compared to the current minimum wage of \$9.57 in Wasco County, which increases to \$10.25 on July 1.

Not only must Omeg pay his 12-20 workers the higher wage, he is required to boost wages for his remaining employees to the same level.

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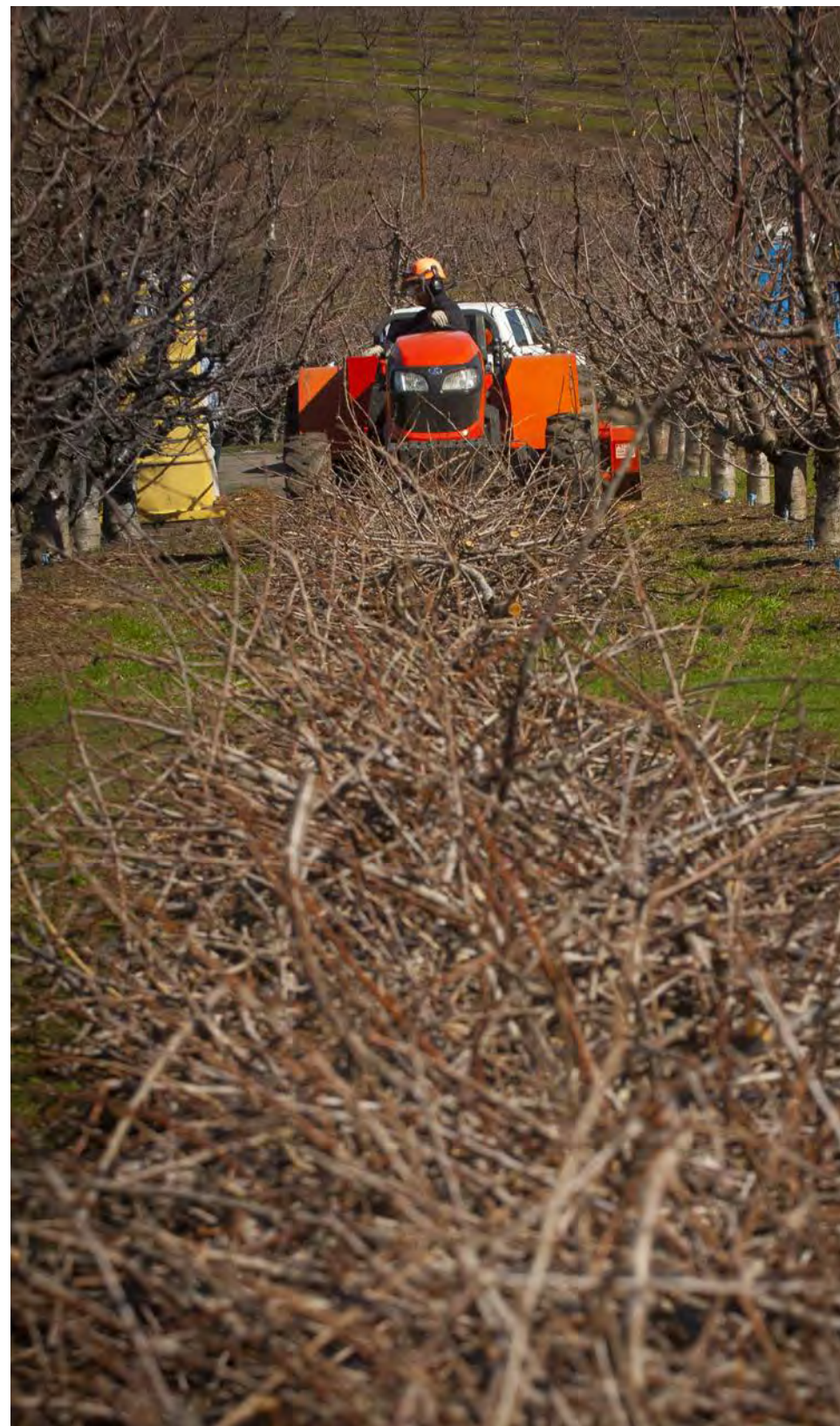
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Elio Andrade reduces branches to mulch in the Omeg Family Orchards. The technique saves labor and improves soil health. The farm will be one of the first operations in the region to bring workers from Latin America to help with pruning and other post-harvest labor.

*Mark B. Gibson photo*

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The H-2A workers are guaranteed in their contract 70 percent of their full-time wage if, for some reason, there is a work stoppage.

"You're talking some serious numbers," said Omeg.

He said there are reams of rules and regulations to decipher about what he can and cannot do.

"It's the ultimate in bureaucratic red tape – that's the understatement of the year," he said.

Even though he does all the legwork on his end correctly, there is no guarantee there won't be a glitch on the government side and he will lose out on gaining workers after all.

In 2015, computers at the State Department, which runs the background checks, were down for a month and that delayed processing of paperwork so that many orchardists missed the window to get H-2A help.

"If all goes well, I wouldn't be surprised if, within the next two years, our entire harvest crew and a large portion of our full-time crew is coming through H-2A," said Omeg, who hopes workers will like the conditions on his family's farm enough to return every year, as many of his current employees do.

"People using H-2A in Washington are reporting an 80-90 percent retention rate so I hope that we have the same relationships," he said.

The possibility of rain ruining his crop during harvest or not getting fruit off the trees while it is marketable keeps Omeg up at night during the growing season.

He can't do anything about the weather but he hopes to have enough workers from now on.

"I've decided I'm going to sleep better and guarantee that I have people here," he said.



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The family cat sits beside a pair of kids boots on the porch of the Omeg family's home.  
*Mark B. Gibson photo*



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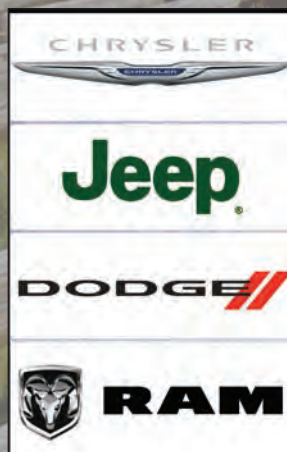
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