

## Farmers, foresters seek urban allies in Oregon's Lane County

With roughly 60 percent of its population living on 1 percent of its land base, Lane County typifies the disconnect between Oregon's urban and rural areas.

However, residents of the Eugene-Springfield metropolitan area can hardly be blamed for misconceptions they may have about agriculture and forestry, said farmer Marie Bowers. "We can't expect people to learn if we're not willing to share," she said. Bowers and others hope to demystify the county's natural resources industry through Lane Families for Farms and Forests, a nonprofit aimed at creating allies across the urban-rural divide.

The group organizes events where farmers and foresters can share a meal with members of community organizations and other Lane County residents, with the objective of building goodwill over the long term.

To add some entertainment value to education, participants compete in a natural resource-related trivia contest.

"I was skeptical about how many people would enjoy it, but it was a hit," said Bowers, the group's chairwoman.

By establishing trust, organizers believe Lane Families for Farms and Forests can be more effective in dispelling misapprehensions than by simply reacting to controversies and emergencies.

"Our goal is to be a resource for people," Bowers said.

"A go-to group where if people have a question about an issue, they know to call us," added Gordon Culbertson, a forestland manager and the group's vice chairman.

The group plans to host tours of farming and timber operations to explain common practices and outline the regulations, such as the Oregon Forest Practices Act, they must follow.

The fear of pesticides is common among urbanites, who often don't understand that farmers and foresters want to save money by reducing chemical usage, Bowers said.

"Immediately they think 'poison,'" she said. "It's the dose that makes the poison."

Likewise, major timber companies are often viewed less sympathetically than small woodland owners, but in reality, the larger outfits own sawmills and other necessary infrastructure, said Culbertson.

"Those big companies are tremendously important to small woodland owners," he said.

While it was once common for Oregon residents to have friends and family involved in natural resource industries, they're now remote for many people, said Scott Dahlman, policy director for the Oregonians for Food and Shelter agribusiness group.

"We've gotten to a situation where more Oregon citizens don't have that connection to agriculture and forestry," he said.

Lane Families for Farms and Forests will help rekindle those relationships, Dahlman said.

Those connections may turn out to be significant in looming political battles, such as a proposed ballot initiative to ban aerial herbicide spraying in Lane County. Supporters are currently gathering signatures to get the measure before voters in 2018.

Such proposals tend to stir up negative emotions over natural resource industries, said Bowers. “Hopefully, we can change the narrative of what’s happening.”

People should realize that violations are rare and most farmers and foresters support Oregon’s regulatory oversight of spray applications, said Culbertson.

“We live out in the country where we use these things,” said Bowers.

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