

Crossover and compromise

Oregon is blessed with agricultural lands that produce more than 225 different commodities.

The production types run the gamut from organic to conventional, and the work required to cultivate these crops varies in intensity. Oregon farmers have even introduced crops that traditionally have not been present in the fertile Willamette Valley.

“Coexistence” is a term often used by our own Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) as well as the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It refers not only to how plants are grown without impacting a neighbor, but the relationships between those neighbors.

Farmers also must contend with the encroachment of neighborhoods into their zone. If we are not careful, the very nature of production agriculture can create conflict.

A shrinking agricultural footprint

Across Oregon, agricultural land is being converted to other uses. Our industry has seen its fair share of this, since much of the industry — whether you are in the Willamette Valley, central or southern Oregon — is both urban and rural.

The 2012 Census of Agriculture revealed that 700,000 fewer acres of farmland existed than did a decade prior. The 16.3 million acres that remained, down from 17 million, may still seem like a lot, but once land is urbanized, it doesn't change back.

We see urban communities reaching into agricultural lands. We economically challenged communities looking to add industry as a quick fix. Ironically, many of these communities used to be natural resource-based. Now, they are trading one type of economy for another.

Conflicts and challenges

Oregon has strong land use and right-to-farm laws. Going back to the 1970s, preserving farmland has been a high priority, as well as a core value.

Over the last two decades, we have seen rapid adoption of new technologies, the rise of organic farming, the emergence of industrial hemp (now federally delisted as a controlled substance), as well as the introduction of tools to improve integrated pest management efforts.

No grower wants to damage their neighbor's ability farm their product of choice. A challenge remains with all the variables involved in production methods, commodities and growing conditions. Conflict is bound to happen. A couple of real examples highlight the challenges:

Hemp vs. Cannabis: The general public has a hard time distinguishing between cannabis (which has high concentrations of tetrahydrocannabinol chemicals, or THC) and industrial hemp (which has low concentrations of THC and is grown for the fiber). *Cannabis* has two primary classifications: *C. indica* and *C. sativa*. Hemp is a member of the *C. sativa* family.

The two crops have been a high-growth area for production. Location and production methods (inside versus outside growing operations) can impact both crops in a negative way. It comes down to THC (the principal psychoactive ingredient in cannabis). If a hemp operation cross-pollinates with a cannabis operation, it boosts THC levels for hemp and decreases the levels for cannabis, making both unsuitable for their respective markets.

We can't ignore the explosion of cannabis production in Oregon. An Oregon Secretary of State audit said that Oregon's supply of cannabis exceeds six years' worth of theoretical supply. It does not help that the Oregon Liquor Control Commission oversees production when they have little grasp of crop management.

Industrial hemp is versatile and can be used for pain relief (cannabidiol oil, or CBD), paper and even clothing. Federal deregulation of hemp will open the door to increased production.

Canola vs. Specialty seed industry: A newly controversial topic involves the production of canola in the Willamette Valley and its ability to co-exist with Brassicaceae specialty seed production.

The growers of specialty seeds seek to maintain genetic purity. Production of certain species can require up to three miles of isolation. While isolation distances are a requirement of specialty seed crop production, canola production has no such restrictions.

Canola has a potential use as a rotational crop for grass seed and wheat growers. Proponents of both communities are passion-



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ate and had difficulty resolving the conflicts. When neighbors feel their respective crop is at risk, it can get personal.

New neighbors vs. Ag lands: There is no doubt that rural areas are beautiful. They're a tremendous place to raise a family or enjoy the country lifestyle. But more and more, these urban transplants are complaining about noise, dust and farm trucks on the rural roads. In short, they like farms but don't like farming. (“Farming is a verb,” as I've heard Rod Park say.)

When trucks arrive, they are loaded. The act of managing field crops is not a high-tech bunny suit environment located deep inside an industrial complex. Farm vehicles and equipment may get in the way of someone's BMW racing to get to a Pilates class. (OK, that was snarky, and three seconds of Pilates class would really hurt me.)

However, most problems can be resolved through fence-post diplomacy and talking to the new neighbors.

A good neighbor policy

The issues are real. Changes in production style or product are constant and can lead to conflict. Growers are passionate. This can make dialogue more difficult.

Add to the mix the encroachment of housing into agricultural lands, and we have some tough conversations ahead.

It is best for all if the discussions happen over the fence or seated at the kitchen table — not at the state legislature. The nursery and greenhouse industry includes both urban and rural people, and the wide range of perspectives that would imply.

But no matter where we stand, we can demonstrate how to succeed in business while still being good neighbors.