



A story of farmland preservation

Longtime Oregon nurseryman spearheads documentary to raise awareness of the issue

Since Senate Bill 100 passed, nurseryman Jim Gilbert has seen various attempts to weaken it, which have largely been turned back. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP

BY CURT KIPP

JIM GILBERT is passionate about Oregon's unique land use planning system, which prioritizes the preservation of farmland. That's why the 80-year-old nurseryman collaborated with filmmaker Joe Wilson to create a documentary, "An Oregon Story: Saving Our Beaches, Farmland and More."

The 1 hour, 20 minute film tells the tale of how visionary leaders created legal protections for farmland more than five decades ago, to prevent suburban sprawl from gobbling up the verdant farmland in the Willamette Valley. Gilbert served as producer and Wilson, a former newspaper editor, as director.

"We have a very unique and wonderful state and we need to keep it that way," Gilbert said. "This part of Oregon history is not well known."

Gilbert pursued the film project while working at **Northwoods Nursery**, a 66-acre wholesale growing operation he founded in 1979 and still owns. His nursery has introduced exotic fruits and berries from Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere to Americans.

Gilbert considers his involvement in the documentary to have been time well spent, knowing that farmland preservation laws make it possible for him to do what he loves.

"I've seen it a few times and the effect on me is still the same," Gilbert said. "It's an emotional feeling for me. We're basically standing on the shoulders of giants, the people who created our land use planning programs. Gov. Tom McCall, an Oregon governor who took such a strong stand for the protection of farmland — it's remarkable."

The documentary draws on archival footage, new interviews shot beginning in 2019, and of course, lush footage showing the state's spectacular natural beauty.

Oregon's big farmland protection breakthrough came in 1972, when Senate Bill 100 was passed by the Oregon Legislature and signed by Gov. McCall, a Republican. It set up statewide land use planning rules and goals that are still in place today. Preservation of agricultural land is high on the list of mandatory statewide land use planning goals, which also include land use planning and citizen involvement.

"The film is really honoring those people who did this work," he said. "They deserve a lot of respect and gratitude for creating our land use planning program."

The decision to make the documentary originated in a conversation Gilbert had with younger people when visiting a local hot springs in the Cascade Range. They weren't familiar with Oregon's innovative

land use planning history, which began with preserving public access to ocean beaches under Gov. Oswald West, who served from 1911–1915. West signed the legislation in 1913, and a state park on the coast was later named for him.

Gilbert mentioned Oswald West State Park to the younger people in the soaking tubs and, to his chagrin, they asked where "Oswald East State Park" was. It reminded him that too few Oregonians are aware of the state's history of land use planning and farmland protection.

Since Senate Bill 100 passed, Gilbert has seen various attempts to weaken it, which largely have been turned back.

"One of my motivations of doing this is the realization that most Oregonians don't know this story," he said. "If you don't know history, you're doomed to repeat the bad stuff."

The state's rules require cities to maintain a 20-year supply of land for future growth, but also requires them to avoid taking over prime farmland, and use areas with lower quality soil first. The law recognizes that once farmland is converted to other purposes it is never converted back.

The most recent session of the Oregon Legislature included a bill to create exceptions to the urban growth

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boundary expansion process, allowing cities to add land for expansion more easily. The purpose was to address a persistent housing shortage and high housing costs by allowing more production. The bill passed and was signed by Gov. Tina Kotek, a Democrat, who has made housing one of her highest priorities.

Gilbert does not believe the exceptions were necessary. He did not like the precedent.

“It’s very easy to build on farmland, it’s nice and flat, but it’s painful to watch happen,” he said. “They come in and scrape off the topsoil that nature has spent thousands of years creating and throw it away and build houses on it. There’s lots of places you can build without taking away some of the best farmland in the world.”

Others say the system needs to remain more flexible if it’s to stay viable and relevant. The Oregon Association of Nurseries took a neutral stance on the bill after working with the governor’s office to make

Showings in May

Thursday, May 9 at 6:30 p.m.
— Hollywood Theatre, 4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd., Portland, OR 97212. Tickets at TinyURL.com/FarmMovie.com. Hosted by 1000 Friends of Oregon.

Saturday, May 18 at 2 p.m.
— Cannon Beach History Center & Museum — 1387 S. Spruce St., Cannon Beach, OR 97110. Hosted by Cannon Beach History Center & Museum (CBHistory.org).

Thursday, May 30 at 7 p.m.
— Fort George Brewery — Fort George Lovell Showroom, 1483 Duane St., Astoria, OR 97103. Hosted by Fort George Brewery (FortGeorgeBrewery.com).

sure the scope of the exceptions was very limited. In part, the motivation was to keep the system adaptable so that pressure does not mount to do away with it entirely.


“Farmland preservation is extremely important to the association,” OAN

Executive Director Jeff Stone said. “We have built our reputation in the state capital on problem solving and working with people. Land use is a very complicated issue.”

Gilbert has been arranging screenings of the film throughout the state since the start of the year. It can also be viewed at AnOregonStory.com. Some showings are free; others have a nominal cost to cover the cost of renting the theater. Gilbert didn’t expect to make any money, but that wasn’t his aim. It’s all about the message.

“The system as it is in place, it works,” he said. “Most UGB expansions get approved There is going to be growth. It’s going to happen. But we’d like it to be smart growth.”

Next up will be an entirely new, 40-minute edit of the film for schools and educational institutions. Gilbert said this version will be built from scratch and he is taking donations to fund it at the film’s website. ☺



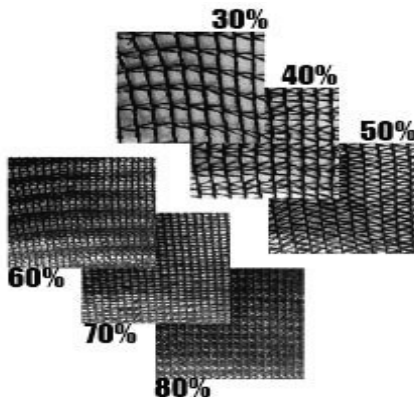
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