A matter of trust

In the fertile heart of the Willamette Valley, the Northwest Willamette Research and Extension Center (NWREC) is quietly undergoing a transformation.

For those unfamiliar, NWREC is a 160-acre agricultural research facility operated by Oregon State University, serving as a hub for scientific inquiry and practical innovation. But what makes this place truly special isn't just the research — it's the spirit of cooperation that drives it forward.

During a recent visit, I had the opportunity to speak with Shawn Donkin, associate dean of research at Oregon State University, and Lloyd Nackley, associate professor and researcher at NWREC. The focus of our discussion wasn't just the cutting-edge experiments being conducted on site, but the relationships and trust that make them possible.

"We have to cooperate with other extension sites and universities," Nackley emphasized. "That keeps us relevant so we're not just in a vacuum."

That sentiment — avoiding silos and working together — was echoed throughout our conversation. At a time when funding is tight and research is more specialized than ever, collaboration is the key to success. NWREC is part of a larger network of research and extension centers that rely on each other to share findings, test new ideas, and amplify impact.

The breadth of research happening at NWREC is impressive. Nackley and his team are deeply involved in the IR-4 pesticide program for specialty crops, ensuring that growers have access to effective and safe pest management solutions. They're also exploring agrivoltaics — the co-location of solar panels and crops — an emerging field that could help farmers generate energy while maintaining agricultural production.

Nursery and greenhouse crop research remains a core focus as well, with experiments aimed at improving sustainability and labor efficiency.

Sustainability is a pressing issue, and NWREC researchers are working on innovative solutions for water usage.

From left: OSU Associate Dean of Research Shawn Donkin, OAN President Ben Verhoeven and OSU Associate Professor and researcher Lloyd Nackley. PHOTO BY DALILA RENDON

Their studies focus on recharging aquifers, determining which pots use the least water, and developing precise irrigation techniques that deliver the right amount of water to each plant only when needed. These efforts are critical as growers face increasing pressure to manage water resources efficiently in a changing climate.

But what really stood out during my visit was the dual role that many researchers play. "A lot of our faculty are research and extension in the same person," Donkin noted.

That's important if you want to both increase knowledge and share it.

This blend of academic rigor and real-world application is what makes NWREC invaluable. It's not just about advancing science; it's about ensuring that research leads to tangible benefits for farmers, businesses, and the broader agricultural community. And that only happens through trust — trust between researchers and growers, between institutions and industries, and between colleagues working toward a common goal.

Donkin put it succinctly: "Break down the ivory tower. Interact with people and connect." To that end, NWREC hosts 3,000 visitors a year. I was one. I encourage you to visit too.

As NWREC continues to evolve, its role as a center for cooperation and innovation will only grow stronger. Science doesn't happen in isolation, and thanks to the dedication of people like Nackley, Donkin, and their teams, the knowledge cultivated here will continue to shape the future of agriculture — not just in Oregon, but far beyond.