

# On the Road Again



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**Willie Nelson is not the only person who can coin the phrase, either in song or in practice.**

Over the past several months, our director of marketing, Beth Farmer, and a member of the board of directors have joined me on visits to various members. This is highly rewarding and provides us with incredible insight into the current challenges and opportunities facing the industry.

## Closing the distance with members

The OAN office may be situated in Wilsonville, but the heart of the association is out in the heart of Nursery Country. When I first became your executive director, now 15 years ago, I made a commitment to our organization to visit member operations. Over the next two years, the staff visited over 200 members. But life comes at us fast, the industry was mired deep into the Great Recession, and we shifted our focus to preserving the industry's economic health. Our visits to nurseries in large numbers unfortunately became a casualty.

## Seeing is understanding

Our best asset on the political front is you, the member. I have shared my perspective with OAN leadership that the single biggest advantage the association has are visits by elected officials to the nursery. We have had cabinet members, U.S. senators and representatives, state-wide elected officials, and state legislators tour all over our great state.

In some cases, it was the first time an elected official has walked an agricultural operation. Others may have visited before, but they remain curious about the issues that confront the largest sector of agriculture. For all of them, a tour provides that individual with a picture in their mind of what the nursery industry is all about.

There are many opportunities for nurseries to host visitors in general, and not just officials. It's beneficial. Chapter events with tours, first aid classes on site, professional groups expanding their knowledge base, and the occasional campaign event all

add to the fabric of our story.

We have been active without drawing much attention to it. The board of directors believes we should be more overt and purposeful about our outreach and activity.

## Who we've seen so far

Our current OAN tour of nurseries has 48 stops already in the books over the last three months, with many more visits being scheduled during the fall. Over a third were small growers that log under \$500,000 in sales annually. These serve as a bedrock of the industry.

Midsized nurseries, with sales between \$500,000 and \$5 million, account for half the visits. The largest nurseries, \$10 million and above in sales, were a vast minority in visits. We visited associate members — who are suppliers and service providers, not growers — as well.

What I found amazing and heartening everywhere we went, no matter the size of the operation, was our members' exceptional passion and drive for growing great plants and trees. That is inspiring.

## Feedback from members

What did we hear? Quite a lot. I asked each member for an unvarnished opinion on what is going on at their business, and I am so happy that it is exactly what we got.

A few members were not happy with aspects of what the association does. I welcome and expect that. We are, after all, a diverse association in many respects. However, most of the conversations fell into how sales are coming along, concerns about labor and cost inputs, and of course, weather and tariffs impacting markets.

The bottom line? Our industry is cautiously optimistic despite the significant challenges of doing business in our state. By and large, growers large and small are facing many of the same challenges.

I asked every grower, "What keeps you up at night?" Members gave many answers, all quite revealing.

I was surprised to hear that the availability of labor was sufficient for most of the members. There are plenty of storm clouds ahead. In particular, growers shared concerns over agricultural overtime, with the threshold going down to 40 hours in

2027. Growers will need to cut hours. The workers want to work, and it is very frustrating that the Oregon Legislature cannot support the association's fix.

Challenges also are daunting at the federal level, and the OAN continues to press hard for a solution to our immigration system.

On a broader level, many growers are focusing on mechanization and infrastructure improvements. Interest rates are a big hinderance. Growers want to invest.

While there is cautious optimism for 2026, many recognize the burst in business during Covid was not reality and that the market is back to before 2020. It is a tougher economy now, with cost inputs rising faster than prices than keep up.

## Catching the OAN doing things well

I am the type who wants to hear it all — the good and the bad. We have heard that the members are proud of our work on advocacy. They recognize that the association works hard to protect the industry. Members also singled out first aid classes, Member Update, Digger and Nursery Guide as very positive member benefits. We intend to make these and other offerings even better in 2026.

## Fall into next year

We will be continuing our visits through the fall. This is not a one-and-done effort, as our incoming president, Patrick Newton from Powell's Nursery, wants to make member visits his centerpiece of 2026.

I am ecstatic about venturing to every corner of our state to hear your story, share your concerns, and work hard on the issues you care about. ☺