



The new farm reality

A dustup over proposed changes to agritourism rules shows how many nurseries and farms have had to diversify to stay alive

BY JON BELL

Looking to boost sales of its trademark tulip bulbs back in 1984, the **Wooden Shoe Tulip Farm** in Woodburn, Oregon took out a newspaper ad encouraging people to visit the farm during the colorful spring bloom over Easter weekend.

Just a few visitors came — “We had a five-car traffic jam,” joked Emily Iverson, a third-generation member of the family who now serves as general manager for the farm — but it started a tradition. The annual floral spectacle slowly grew over the years, attracting more and more people and becoming more of an annual festival.

For many years, Wooden Shoe didn’t charge for parking or admission. But >>



In the modern-day world of agricultural uncertainty, the tulip festival is what keeps Wooden Shoe afloat. PHOTO BY CURT KIPP (TOP) AND PHOTO COURTESY OF WOODEN SHOE TULIP FARM

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While French Prairie Gardens still grows ryegrass, wheat, clover and hazelnuts, over the years it has added events and attractions like flower festivals, corn mazes and pig races as a way to draw more people to the farm and to generate more revenue. PHOTO BY VIC PANICKUL

that changed in 2001, when there was a crash in the worldwide tulip bulb market. That's when the farm decided it had to start charging for its festival — or risk closing shop for good.

Flowers and farming

These days, the annual Wood Shoe Tulip Festival draws 150,000 visitors to the farm every April. There are fields of vibrant tulips, for sure, but there's also carnival rides, ponies, wine and beer tasting, food and craft vendors, and even hot air balloon rides. On top of the 40 acres of tulips and the festival, Wooden Shoe also farms hundreds of additional acres, planting crops like grass seed, wheat and clover depending on what's in demand.

But in the modern-day world of agricultural uncertainty, the tulip festival is what keeps Wooden Shoe afloat.

"That really has been the main source of our survival the last 25 years," Iverson said. "We are a farm at heart. We're a bunch of farmers just piecing it together, trying to keep our farm alive and the land

in agriculture. But I wouldn't be back on the family farm if it wasn't for the festival, and we wouldn't have a farm if it wasn't for the festival."

Proposed farm rules

Earlier this year, however, Wooden Shoe and other farms and nurseries that dabble in the world of agritourism got a bit of a scare when the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD) issued new draft rules guiding what farms can sell and what activities they can offer. The rules, drafted by a committee comprised of county planners, farmers and land-use groups, could have drastically dented operations at places like Wooden Shoe, who have come to rely on farm-related activities and attractions to help diversify their revenue streams and keep their businesses viable.

Not long after the draft rules showed their head, farms and nurseries around the state raised warning flags on social media; Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek's office received

thousands of calls and emails. It was enough that Kotek paused the rulemaking process for the time being. But it also brought an important issue into the light — one that's likely to continue impacting Oregon nurseries and farms as they continue to try and balance the rich heritage of farming in Oregon and the reality of making a living in agriculture in the 21st century.

"Agritourism is what has kept our farm alive," Iverson said. "With the uncertainty of conventional agriculture right now, we're not making much money farming. I don't want to see amusement parks on our farms, but I think farmers should be allowed to have the trust that they're doing the right thing, and I don't see that trust right now."

Change in the air

The proposed rule changes came about through a seemingly well-intentioned effort by the DLCD to try and clarify existing rules about agritourism in the state. While there are rules in place, how they're interpreted and enforced var-

ies from county to county.

Farmers, growers, county officials and representatives from land-use organizations like 1,000 Friends of Oregon were all part of the committee that initially dove into the rulemaking process. They were looking at several areas that the state regulates in terms of farming and the activities that are permitted on farms.

Exclusive farm use (EFU) zones aim to preserve land for farm use in Oregon, which includes raising, harvesting and selling crops as well as feeding, raising and selling livestock. Allowable uses in exclusive farm zones include direct sales, u-pick and u-cut. Sales are limited to what is grown on site.

Farm stand designations allow farms to sell crops and livestock produced on the property or on other properties in the state. Farm stands also cover activities like corn mazes, pumpkin patches, hayrides and

farm-to-table dinners. They also limit the sale of incidental items and fees from promotional activities to 25% of total sales.

And then there are agritourism and commercial events or activities, which include categories like education, hospitality and entertainment. Because these kinds of events — think concerts, weddings and overnight events — can potentially impact neighbors, traffic and other factors, they're often regulated a little more strictly. Counties are able to determine if they want to allow agritourism events in their county, which is where inconsistencies arise on the interpretation of what's permitted.

"I think there's a lot of confusion on how to interpret the different uses, and the way the rules work are not really conducive for farm operators," Iverson said. "So for us, 25% of our income can be merchandise or admission and then 75% of our income has to be agriculture related.

That's fine, but for us, say with admission, we jeopardize our crop and leave it in the field for people to view. So is that included in our admission cost since we're not growing it as food? There's just a lot of gray areas."

While the draft rules were supposed to add clarity, many farmers and growers felt they went the opposite direction and made the waters even muddier. They let Gov. Kotek know about it in July, and she stepped on the brakes to allow more conversations to take place before any changes are made.

"I want to reassure farmers who have been anxious and frustrated about how proposed changes to existing rules regarding farm stand operations may affect their businesses that I hear you and am paying attention," Kotek said in a statement. "We can support local farm businesses while also preserving Oregon's historic land >>



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use system. This is not an either/or conversation. We need to acknowledge that some of our small and midsize farms need to maintain or consider different business models to continue to deliver the agricultural products and working farms we all value in Oregon. New models for financial sustainability do not have to be at odds with our values.”

Forever farms

That’s how Stacy Bunke, co-owner of **French Prairie Gardens** in St. Paul, sees it. The family’s property started out as a conventional farm but has grown over the past nearly 40 years into a popular destination that draws at least 25,000 people a year.

While the farm still grows rye grass, wheat, clover and hazelnuts, over the years it has added events and attractions like flower festivals, corn mazes and pig races as a way to draw more people to the farm and to generate more revenue.

“Every year we try to change things and try to get more people out to help support the farm,” Bunke said. “The most important thing is that we’re all just trying to continue to keep our farms and our families intact and keep the land in agriculture. If we don’t have customers to support us, farms like us won’t exist anymore.”

Keeping Oregon farmland in production is important for the state. And if that means finding new ways for farms and nurseries to bring paying customers onto their properties, that should be part of the equation when it comes to rules and regulations.

“I think part of it is about retaining the cultural heritage of farms in Oregon,” said Mike Clifford, owner of Trillium Nursery Farm, a hybrid tree nursery and event venue in Redmond, Washington. “Oregon has a huge historical diversity when it comes to its farms. I’d hate to see them being bulldozed if they aren’t able to remain viable.”

Unlike a more traditional farm or nursery, Trillium started out blending agriculture and events almost from the get-go when Clifford founded it a few years ago. He bought the unique property, which was already home to some mature shrubs



At Swan Island Dahlias in Canby, an annual two-month dahlia festival brings between 30,000 and 40,000 visitors to the farm every year. PHOTO COURTESY OF SWAN ISLAND DAHLIAS

and trees, not to mention several charming buildings that just needed a little attention to restore their character.

He’s since added thousands of trees and shrubs as part of the nursery, while his daughter, Karisa Sloan, heads up the venue business, booking weddings and other events. Next up: an espresso stand and café to capture some of the traffic that rolls by Trillium every day.

“The nursery business is hard,” Clifford said. “Being diverse can be key. And to be diverse, you need multiple streams of revenue.”

Festival season

At **Swan Island Dahlias** in Canby, an annual two-month dahlia festival brings between 30,000 and 40,000 visitors to the farm every year. But when Nicholas Gitts, who owns Swan Island with his wife, Linda, first learned about the proposed rule changes, he said he was more concerned for some of the other businesses who rely more on festivals and events than Swan Island does.

“I was kind of bothered that they might shut down some of the festivals and things,” he said, “but for us, the festival is kind of an advertising tool and not a monetary one.”

Swan Island sells its renowned dahlia tubers nationally, largely through mail order or online. Gitts said only about 20% of that business comes from Oregon,

so the annual festival, even though it’s popular, isn’t what makes or breaks it for Swan Island.

At present, Swan Island doesn’t even charge festival attendees for parking. Doing so, Gitts said, would likely mean people would try to park along the roads outside the farm, which would probably rub some neighbors the wrong way — one of the big concerns facing farms who invite the public to their properties.

“We have our gift shop and we sell lots of product during the festival days. We’ll sell 1,000 bunches of cut flowers or more in a day,” he said. “So with people here, we are taking money in, but it doesn’t really compare to our overall bulb sales online.”

Even so, Gitts, like many others, wants Oregon farmers and growers to continue to be able to do what they need to do to keep farming and helping people enjoy the bounties of Oregon agriculture anyway they can. Any changes to the rules should only make it easier for farms to strike a healthy balance.

“I just really hope and wish that festivals and other parts of the business like that can all be maintained,” Gitts said. ☺

Jon Bell is an Oregon freelance journalist who writes about everything from Mt. Hood and craft beer to real estate and the great outdoors. His website is JBellInk.com.