

Misleading publicity hurts planning

Oregon State University report lacks credibility, including an outmoded assessment of hobby farming



OREGON LAND USE

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Oregon State University last month sent out a press release to highlight the work of some of its academics. If the point was to draw attention to the work, it succeeded; however, accuracy was perhaps sacrificed.

The press release and the academic article it publicized describe the results of a “literature survey” made a few years ago for the Oregon Task Force on Land Use Planning. The survey, based solely on previous research, concluded that there was insufficient empirical evidence because of differences over how to measure the state planning program’s “effectiveness” of preserving agricultural and forest lands. However, according to the OSU report, the program provided a “measurable degree of protection” for farm and forest lands.

Also, there may have been some unanticipated impacts, such as the growth of “hobby farms,” that may not preserve agriculture. It was this hobby farm aspect of the report that the press release emphasized and that led to subsequent headlines proclaiming that the Oregon planning system was “not working as planned.”

The concern over hobby farms was based on data from the early days of the state’s planning program, before it was strengthened in 1993. How either the article or press release could fail to note that these concerns were largely answered by these later program changes is difficult to understand and raises serious questions of academic judgment.

Besides relying primarily on obsolete data selections from a literature survey rather than more recent research that is fairly positive about the state land use program, the authors of the article and press release obviously did not display any effort to check with those engaged in the state’s resource lands planning program, who would have shared the ongoing and current data they maintain.

The report itself could well have been more aggressive in pursuing other available data and research, such as:

- Between 1973 and 1986, more than 300,000 acres of land in the Willamette Valley were re-designated from rural development to exclusive farm use. These actions do not guarantee the land will be put to resource use, but do provide compelling incentives to plant crops and prohibit residential subdivisions.
- Based on a 1991 study that demonstrated that the program was not then protecting resource lands adequately, the Oregon Legislature revised the program and the Land Conservation and

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Development Commission adopted standards to ensure that dwellings in farm zones are for true farmers and prohibited creation of new parcels and additional dwellings in resource zones for hobby farms.

- Between 1992 and 1997, 71 percent of agricultural lands converted to development occurred either within either urban growth boundaries or rural development “exception” areas.
- The most recent study of the agricultural land use program was a 2008 study based in Hood River County showing that farm-related dwellings increased agricultural productivity and that the appropriate siting of non-farm dwellings did not lead to a significant decrease in farm use in the area.

The article and press release assume that dwellings are allowed if the landowner simply buys enough land to meet a modest minimum lot size. This assumption is simply not true – a farm dwelling must be part of a viable farming operation, grossing at least \$40,000 or \$80,000 per year in farm income, depending on the quality of the farmland, or meet a 160-acre minimum lot size in Western Oregon or a higher standard in Eastern Oregon. It is simply preposterous to argue that the Oregon planning program protects or encourages hobby farming.

Oregon State University and certain media have done a disservice to the agricultural and conservation communities by preparing a press release and article based on a stale report that admits that farmlands have been preserved, despite some academic difficulties in measuring that result, and advancing gratuitous speculation on the quality of the state’s land-use program.

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