

Community economist studies small farms

By DEAN BRICKEY
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HERMISTON - Bruce Sorte has been looking into Umatilla County's agricultural future.

Sorte doesn't have a small, round, draped table and a crystal ball, but his job does involve looking forward.

Sorte is a community economist in the Oregon State University Eastern Oregon Rural Studies Program. His office is at Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, but he often parks his Airstream trailer at the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Education Center.

"I keep moving all summer long," he said.

One recent week he in was Lakeview Monday, Burns Tuesday, Hermiston Wednesday and Corvallis Thursday.

"My main job, as I work with folks, is to help them predict the future," he said recently in his temporary office at the Hermiston ag center. "Once they have a good sense of what's going to happen next, they do a pretty good job."

Sorte's method is talking with folks about their own visions of the future, then helping them consider possibilities they may not have thought of.

His most recent local effort was a four-month adaptive farming study for Umatilla County. He mainly studied the viability of 10- to 40-acre farms at the request of the county planning department.

Sorte's study involved three distinct areas of this diverse county. He reviewed the irrigated, row-crop region of Hermiston and Umatilla; the tree-fruit area of Milton-Freewater and the wheat and cattle country around Pendleton and Pilot Rock.

He focused on the question: How many acres does it take to have a successful, persistent farm?

"Agriculture has changed quite a bit in terms of the need to be bigger to make more money," Sorte said. "Today, things can be scaled up or down, easier than in the past."

Sorte believes the results of his study may be of interest to wheat farmers who are considering diversifying, for example.

Tamra Mabbott, Umatilla County planning director, said the county hired Sorte for \$10,000 to follow up on the county's earlier decision to allow farm zones with minimum lot sizes smaller than the state's 80-acre minimum.



A harvester cuts standing wheat on a farm east of Echo. Nearly 290,000 acres of wheat were grown in Umatilla County in 2008 according to an

analysis completed recently by Bruce Sorte of Oregon State University.

File photo

"We received a \$10,000 grant for the study," she said. "OSU subsidized the study as well with an in-kind contribution, so the total value was more than \$10,000."

Umatilla County's original zoning ordinance included some Exclusive Farm Use zones that allowed 10-20- and 40-acre parcels. The Legislature changed the land-use laws in the early 1990s, establishing an 80-acre minimum statewide, so the smaller EFU zones aren't legal under state law. Mabbott said the county needed a scientific reason to justify grandfathering in 10-, 20- and 40-acre parcels. That prompted Sorte's study.

The county will notify owners of small farm parcels about the study and invite them to public meetings to discuss it.

The meetings will be at 7 p.m. Aug. 3 in the Stafford Hansell Government Center in Hermiston and 7 p.m. Aug. 4 at the Community Center in Milton-Freewater.

"Bruce will present his report and get feedback from landowners," Mabbott said.