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Orchardist seeks success for all

Cherry grower Ken Bailey looks for common ground in issues affecting ag

Mitch Lies

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Ken Bailey stands in his cherry orchard in The Dalles, Ore. Bailey was a vital voice for Oregon agriculture during his stint on the Big Look Task Force, according to task force chairman Mike Thorne.

sign the landmark legislation.

That accomplishment drew raves in land-use circles. But it's nothing less than Bailey expected.

Bailey, 65, vice president of Orchard View Farms, is used to success.

Bailey and his brother, Bob, have expanded the family farm from a good-sized Oregon cherry orchard in the 1960s to what today is one of the biggest cherry farms in the world, with upwards of 1,700 acres in cherry production and a net worth of between \$20 million and \$25 million.

Orchard View has added upwards of 1,000 acres of cherries in the past two decades. It's growth involves far more than just buying and leasing acreage. It has included the adoption of the latest technology and the embrace of a changing social and environmental attitude that permeates today's agricultural.

In the 1990s, the Baileys broke ground when they introduced modified atmosphere packing that still is used today to preserve the freshness of cherries during storage and transport. The system, developed by Ken's father, Don, is patented and used by packers in Chile, Australia and New Zealand.

In addition to keeping cherries fresh during storage and transport, the system extends the duration fresh cherries are available each growing season.

THE DALLES, Ore. - Oregon's 10-member Big Look Task Force late last year completed its mission when it handed lawmakers guidelines for tweaking the state's 30-plus-year-old land-use system.

The task force spent three years developing the guidelines. In the ensuing months, member Ken Bailey has traveled often from his cherry orchard in The Dalles to the state Capitol to monitor the progress of a bill lawmakers crafted from the task force's recommendations.

He was on hand April 28 when the House Land Use Committee, with the blessing of property rights backers and conservationists, moved the bill to the House floor.

House Bill 2229 has now passed the House and Senate and could soon arrive on the desk of Gov. Ted Kulongoski, who is expected to

Between the packing system and new late-maturing varieties, some buyers, Bailey said, sell fresh cherries from Orchard View well into September.

Selling fresh cherries into even mid-August was unheard of in the mid-1960s when Bailey returned to the family orchard after obtaining a bachelor of science degree in horticulture from Oregon State University. Then, he said, harvest lasted two to three weeks. Today, harvest typically lasts eight weeks.

In addition to an expanded growing season, Orchard View has dramatically expanded its presence on the international scene in recent years. The farm is a major player in nearly every cherry-buying region in the world.

Part of its penetration into international markets can be traced to its willingness to adopt agricultural practices required in certain European and Asian markets.

Orchard View was the first farm in Oregon to gain EurepGAP certification. Now called GlobalGAP, the certification gives the farm entry into several overseas grocery store chains that otherwise would be off-limits.

The farm also was one of the first farms certified by Food Alliance, an Oregon-based certifier.

The move into sustainable certification came naturally, Bailey said.

"We found we were doing the practices anyway," Bailey said, "so we might just as well get credit for it."

At times it is an added expense to produce the extensive documentation the certifications demand, he said, but it has proven worthwhile.

"We found we can get a little better price sometimes and a little better access to markets," Bailey said.

The certifications require, among other sustainable practices, that a farm has good worker relations - another area Orchard View excels in.

Among its innovative farm labor practices, in recent years the farm started giving workers a bonus to use as down payment on a house. The program has helped generate farmworker allegiance, Bailey said, and helped free-up farmworker housing for seasonal workers.

It has more than paid for itself, Bailey said.

Orchard View also was one of the first farms in the Northwest to pack its own fruit. The farm built an apple line in 1980 and three years later put in a cherry line.

Orchard View expanded its cherry-packing capacity dramatically in recent years: Today it can pack 20 tons an hour. Orchard View expects to average 15 tons an hour this year during the plant's eight-week run.

While Bailey has become well known in cherry production circles, his work off the farm, to some, has been his biggest contribution to Oregon agriculture.

In addition to serving as the agricultural voice on the Big Look Task Force, Bailey serves on Oregon's State Board of Agriculture and heads the state Water Quality Advisory Board.

His work on the Water Quality Advisory Board has been invaluable, said Ray Jaendl, administrator of Oregon Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Division.

"He has a positive spin on things and is realistic in trying to develop a program that will achieve water quality goals, while recognizing the unique challenges of agriculture," Jaendl said.

Bailey also in recent years has served on the National Council of Agricultural Employers and the Wasco County Economic Development Commission.

"Why do people volunteer for anything?" he responded when asked why he puts so much time towards industry and community groups. "It's probably because you have a bigger view of the world than just yourself, and you want to contribute.

"Actually, people talk about how much time I've given, but I've gained tremendously from my experiences," Bailey said.

Bailey's work on the Big Look Task Force was significant, said Mike Thorne, a rancher from Pendleton, who chaired the task force.

"Ken is very understanding and knowledgeable of agricultural issues with regard to the subject of land use," Thorne said. "And he did a very good job of articulating those points. He is persistent, a good spokesperson and a good leader."

Oregon Department of Agriculture Director Katy Coba, Thorne's daughter, also lauded Bailey.

"We are very much indebted to his efforts," Coba said. "Specifically, Ken has helped the Oregon Department of Agriculture in several ways, including his work on ag water quality plans, pesticide use reporting and land use."

Bailey also has provided a valuable link between agriculture and the environmental community, said Joe Whitworth, president of The Freshwater Trust.

Bailey serves as the point person for a program started by Oregon Trout - now The Freshwater Trust - that works with farmers to improve riparian areas.

"The agricultural and conservation communities are natural allies that at times can't speak the same language," Whitworth said. "And Ken Bailey has proven a good translator. He's forward thinking, yet very practical."

"In reality, (farmers and the environmental community) have a lot of things in common," Bailey said. "The more we as farmers get involved with them, the better they understand us, and the better we understand them.

"I think if we can work together at this, we can all be successful," he said.

Staff writer Mitch Lies is based in Salem. E-mail: mlies@capitalpress.com.