

Oregon Dept. of Agriculture director Katy Coba looks ahead to the new year

ODA Director sees 2007 as a year of opportunity for ag

December 27, 2006... The director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture is taking an optimistic attitude into the new year as she evaluates the challenges and opportunities for both ODA and the agriculture industry in 2007. In each of ODA's program areas of agricultural marketing, natural resource protection, and food safety and consumer protection, there is reason to believe the next 12 months will be a significant time for Oregon agriculture.

"I'm anxious to see the final 2006 production and sales numbers for Oregon agriculture," says Coba. "I have a sense they will be pretty good in terms of showing agriculture's contribution to the state's economy. But looking ahead, I'm very excited about 2007."

In the area of promotion and marketing of Oregon agricultural products, Coba uses the analogy of a three-legged stool— international markets, domestic markets outside of Oregon, and local markets— each critical to the overall success of Oregon agriculture. Coba expects continued growth in all three venues.

"The strong interest right now in buying local and having Oregonians interested in supporting local agriculture is a very positive trend for the industry," says Coba. "I think that movement supports family farmers, which is the large majority of what we have in Oregon, and helps keep them successful and in business. It also connects urban dwellers with agriculture in the state."

Coba expects direct farm marketing, and the increase in locally-grown products in Oregon restaurants and retail stores to continue in 2007. However, moving farm products across the border will still remain a major focus.

"In reality, 85 percent of what we produce leaves Oregon," says Coba. "We could triple consumption within Oregon of what we produce and it would have a marginal impact on the amount of Oregon agriculture that moves into the local market."

Coba expects Asia to remain a high priority for marketing efforts with Japan remaining Oregon's top export customer. At the federal level, a free trade agreement with South Korea might be produced in 2007 which would bode well for Oregon agricultural products. Exports to China are growing by leaps and bounds. Domestically, top Oregon commodities such as nursery products and grass seed will continue to find customers throughout the U.S. as well as Canada.

"ODA has a nationally-recognized marketing division and we are in close contact with the industry," says Coba. "We understand where their focus is and we are complementing that focus. Our job is to also look for new opportunities, but we remain active in Asia and will keep an eye on Europe, Canada, and Mexico."

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In the area of natural resource protection, Cobra expects air to join land and water as issues worth watching in 2007. ODA will be right in the middle of those issues.

"We will continue doing the work we've been doing with water quality," says Cobra. "We are seeing some great improvement on the ground. Our partnerships with soil and water conservation districts, watershed councils, and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board will continue to bring resources to agricultural producers to do things that improve water quality. At the federal level, the 2007 Farm bill will be critical in continuing the investment in conservation programs. Our producers take advantage of those programs."

Land use in Oregon— particularly what to do with Measure 37 and all the claims for compensation by landowners— will no doubt receive more attention this coming year and could impact agriculture. So will air quality issues. The practice of field burning by Willamette Valley grass seed farmers is being challenged by some citizens. The issue will be discussed by the 2007 Oregon Legislature. Meanwhile, ODA, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, and industry groups are working on proposed legislation that would modify agriculture's exemption from the federal Clean Air Act.

Cobra expects 2007 to also test Oregon's vigilance against the introduction of invasive species. ODA programs will continue to address those incursions as they are found.

"With a global economy, and products and people moving so much, we will continue having threats from invasive weeds, pests, and diseases," says Cobra. "These organisms could have a huge negative impact on Oregon agriculture if we don't stay on top of them."

In the area of food safety, events of 2006 have caught the attention of the American consumer.

"E. coli outbreaks with bagged spinach and, more recently, Taco Bell, have created more concern among consumers," says Cobra. "It's very important for ODA to continue doing a good job with our food safety program and to make sure Oregon products are indeed safe."

An issue creating a great deal of excitement heading into 2007 is renewable energy. Cobra expects legislation that will create greater incentives for alternative energy production.

"There are tremendous potential impacts for Oregon agriculture— whether farmers are growing something for biodiesel or ethanol production, or maybe utilizing wind energy," says Cobra.

Finally, ODA's director has a message of thanks to Oregon's agricultural producers as they begin planning— and later planting— for 2007.

"I want to commend Oregon farmers, ranchers, and processors for what they do," says Cobra. "Often times, their work goes unnoticed. But I think that trend is turning a little bit. More and more urban Oregonians are appreciative of those who work and maintain the land, and the tough job it is. Providing a safe, healthy, high-quality product for all of us to enjoy is truly a benefit. I anticipate 2007 will be a good year for agriculture."

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