Farmers, conservation groups join to preserve farmland near Portland's suburbs

Eric Mortensen
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WILSONVILLE -- The region's unsettled growth questions round into view at Peter McDonald's 1870s farmhouse. All the long-range population and job projections. All the tense debate over designating land for houses, stores and factories, or for farms and forests.

McDonald's Inchinnan Farm sits along the Willamette River, 20 minutes removed from the 1.5 million people who fill the Portland metro area and 20 years shy of the 1 million more projected to join them. But out the farmhouse windows and beyond the uniform rows of his hazelnut trees, there isn't another structure, vehicle or person in sight.

McDonald and a rising chorus of fellow farmers want to keep it that way.

Jamie Francis/The Oregonian

An assurance that his farm west of Wilsonville will remain rural for the next 40 to 50 years instead of being developed allows Peter McDonald to make long-range plans to renew his hazelnut orchard and to pass on the operation to his son. Jamie Francis/The OregonianTo an extent not seen since Oregon's land-use system was adopted 35 years ago, farmers in Clackamas, Multnomah and especially Washington County are siding with conservation groups and local-food activists on the issue of designating urban and rural reserves -- areas that will be developed or preserved for the next 40 to 50 years.

At public hearings across the region, plain-spoken farmers in Carhartt jackets, work boots and blue jeans are calling for compact cities, tight urban growth boundaries and strict protection of farmland. Jim Johnson, the state Department of Agriculture's land-use specialist, said he's never seen such a collaboration of farmers and environmentalists

They've met some pushback, such as from homebuilders who point out that farm and conservation groups want about 230,000 acres of rural reserves -- nearly 10 times more land than would be designated for development.

The infill, redevelopment and density required to cram growth into smaller urban reserves

would be unacceptable to most people, says Dave Nielsen, CEO of the Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland. So, too, would taking that much land "off the table for 50 years" for housing, industry and commercial development, he says.

Metro-area governments are expected to make a recommendation in February and a final decision later this year.

To some, the decision is an echo of Senate Bill 100, the 1974 legislation that created Oregon's land-use system and was intended to save farms from urban sprawl. During a Jan. 11 news conference, alternative farmer Laura Masterson said the urban-rural reserves issue is "our Senate Bill 100."

"Farmers and conservation groups have often disagreed in the past," Washington County Farm Bureau President Dave Vanasche said at the news conference. "But on this issue we strongly agree: Urban sprawl destroys valuable farmland, streams and wildlife habitat."

McDonald agrees, but for him it's also a personal issue -- one of trust and stewardship.

Without the land-use zoning that initially separated urban from rural, McDonald believes fast-growing Wilsonville, 4 miles east, would have overrun his orchard in the intervening years. A subdivision might have sprung up next door, with neighbors who wouldn't abide the noise, dust and long hours that accompany farming.

Without the proposal now to designate urban and rural reserves, McDonald would not be confident about upgrading his nut orchard and passing it on to his son.

The issue of keeping farms safe from development has come full circle in the urban-rural reserves debate, but arrives with a nuanced realization of what's at stake.

"There's a lot more to land-use than preserving farmland," McDonald says. "I hope we are coming to a different world, where cities are vibrant places where people want to live.

"And let those of us who want to farm get on with the farming."

A name from Scotland

McDonald is nearing 70. He's trim and reserved, with a voice that hints at his Scottish heritage. His farm is named for a farming region, Inchinnan, alongside the River Clyde in Scotland. His father emigrated from there to Canada, eventually settling in Portland in the 1920s.

The younger McDonald might have seemed an odd choice for 1000 Friends of Oregon's first board of directors when it was announced by former Gov. Tom McCall in 1975. He certainly wasn't as well-known as the other luminaries chosen to guide the watchdog conservation group.

He was a farmer, but no bumpkin. He had a degree in forestry, and after college had spent six years in Kenya managing forest plots and heading research for the Kenyan government. Returning to Oregon in 1972 with his wife, Jill, he set about converting part of his father's 420-acre cattle ranch to a filbert orchard, putting most of the rest in timber. "I'm a tree guy," he would say.

McDonald had followed the debate over Senate Bill 100, and believed land-use planning was crucial. Wilsonville was on the verge of booming; Tektronics, the electronics firm, had just

located there. Some in town were talking about a housing development going in between Wilsonville and McDonald's farm.

McDonald saw it as a threat. Much of his youth had been spent in splendid wanderings on his family's first farm off Upper Boones Ferry Road, between Lake Oswego and Portland, until it was sold and paved over. Even though that development provided the money for his father to buy the property along the Willamette in Wilsonville, it ripped McDonald to lose the original farm.

Calls himself a "steward"
"It was a big deal in my life to see that," he says. "I was determined not to let that happen to this farm. My father entrusted this farm to me.

"I've always felt I was a caretaker or a steward, not an owner in the traditional sense."

That trust, like the land-use issues that framed it, has come around again. McDonald sees himself farming perhaps another 10 years. If his land is designated as "rural reserve," as seems most likely, it will remain farmland for 40 to 50 years. Time enough, and certainty enough, for his son, James, 30, to take over.

"That's certainly the end of my life, and close to the end of his working life," McDonald says. "He's an electrical engineer; he'd like to come back to the farm.

"We're all set up for a generational change. With the reserves policy, it makes it so we can really plan out quite far."

That surety expresses itself another way. Eastern filbert blight, a tree disease that kills nut production, has invaded McDonald's orchard. He is replacing diseased trees with a blight-resistant variety. It's an expensive process, and it will be several years before the new trees produce nuts in commercially viable quantities. But knowing the farm will endure for decades assures a reward for patience.

The trust has held, even with change. Oregon has grown by more than 1 million people since McDonald took over the farm in the 1970s. Most of the hazelnuts he grows are eaten as snacks in China, Vietnam and Hong Kong -- markets that didn't exist 10 years ago. The U.S. State Department recently sent him to the Republic of Georgia to advise hazelnut farmers there.

But the view out McDonald's farmhouse window is unchanged. Outside, his son's young Airedale romps through the nut orchard, where promise is afoot.

Her name is Hazel.