

# The Oregonian

## OREGON AT A CROSSROADS

### *Saving French Prairie*

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The Oregonian

Oregonians, and especially those who live in and around metro Portland and the Willamette Valley, should ask themselves two seemingly curious but important questions:

What is French Prairie?

And why does saving it matter?

The answers go to the soul of Oregon: who we are as a people, why we came here and who we will be in the future? Understanding the history of French Prairie -- the "Eden at the end of the Oregon Trail" -- is critically relevant to all Oregonians today.

David Brauner, a professor of archaeology at Oregon State University, answers the two questions this way: "French Prairie is possibly the most historic piece of real estate in the entire West, certainly in the Pacific Northwest, and it must be protected."

French Prairie is the broad expanse of fertile farmland that lies between the Willamette River on the north and Lake Labish (near Keizer) on the south and between the Willamette on the west and the Pudding River on the east.

This is where the first non-native inhabitants of Oregon -- French-Canadian fur trappers -- settled and married Native Americans and where the earliest white settlers from the East settled. This is where Oregon's self-government was first established, placing our feet on the path to statehood.

And this is where we should comprehend what the earliest Oregon pioneers must surely have as they looked out over French Prairie for the first time: This is it, the land of milk and honey, the green Eden at the end of the long hard trail. The idea of living in this naturally rich land, with its legacy of independent, free-thinking people who believed in self-government and were willing to sacrifice to be worthy of this special place, is -- or should be -- heady stuff. And it's why it needs protecting.

Let California and Seattle be the places of sprawl and unrestrained commerce. Let us be committed to stewardship and sustainability.

Brauner's emphasis is on the social history of French Prairie, but there are also practical concerns for Oregonians, because the social history of French Prairie is closely tied to agriculture. A clue to the significance of that comes from taking a look at the satellite photo of the Northwest on the cover of "The Atlas of Oregon" and noticing just how little of the state is actually high-quality agricultural land.

Precious little -- almost all of it is in the Willamette Valley -- but it possesses some of the most fertile soils in the world. And French Prairie, at the north end of the Willamette Valley, is directly in the development path south from Portland.

This area was used agriculturally by Native Americans for centuries before white settlers arrived, and today it remains an exceptionally productive agricultural region, producing fruit and vegetable crops and seed and nursery stock -- all of which add up to Oregon's second-largest industry, which includes \$1 billion in exports per year, making it one of Oregon's traded-sector bright spots.

Everyone is aware of the worsening U.S. economy, producing an unease that now trumps the war in Iraq as Americans' number one concern. And rightly so: Gas prices in Oregon now average more than \$3.60 per gallon. The price of wheat has risen more than 100 percent in the past year; flour is up 173 percent in the last year, milk is up 33 percent, electricity 11.5 percent ("Oregonians feel squeeze," April 16).

Daily, the news brings more for concern. Food riots in foreign cities. Fuel price protests on the East Coast, even in Portland, by long-haul truckers. Foreclosures. All of these things are linked economically, and unlike the 1970s when OPEC's embargo temporarily spiked oil prices, today we're in an entirely different global circumstance characterized by a shortage of established production sources, declining outputs in some oil-producing countries, increasing demand in the developing world and substantial geopolitical unrest affecting oil prices.

These are directly translating into increased food costs. Gasoline is only one byproduct of oil refining, along with plastics, fertilizer, pharmaceuticals and fabrics. Our country's food production practices are based on intensive monoculture in limited locales with a high usage of fertilizers and pesticides. Increasing oil prices drive up the cost of those chemicals as well as diesel fuel for tractors and equipment.

These factors are further compounded by the long-haul trucking of our food from where it's grown to where we live. A hedge against this continuing economic dislocation is what we can grow locally for food and fuel, which also creates carbon offsets that are a critically important balance and an important assurance in a time of uncertainty.

An important link for that locally grown food are our farmers markets. But they still only represent a small percentage of all the food we eat (only 2 percent of the food eaten in Benton County, for instance, is grown in Benton County).

So what would it take to get to the point where most of our food is locally grown? The answer is that it would take a lot: changes in economics, in buying habits (local varieties instead of out-of-state exotics), in planting choices (vegetables instead of grass seed), in lifestyle (fewer food choices in our markets). But first and foremost, it requires the preservation of our farmland. You can't grow food locally if you've turned your farmland into industrial parks and housing developments.

We have an unparalleled agricultural resource close to most of our homes and markets. Will we forgo this unique resource so that a few land speculators and commercial developers can profit by "flipping" farmland for personal gain? Will ours be the generation that trades our precious green landscape for the thoughtless development that former Gov. Tom McCall warned us about a generation ago?

We are again at a critical fork in the road. One leads to the Californization of Oregon, the other traces the steps of earlier generations of Oregonians who view stewardship of this great green landscape as a birthright and a responsibility to generations of Oregonians yet unborn.

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