

# Editors Corner



by Matteo  
G. Luccio

Except perhaps for the mythical mountain-top hermit, politics matters. In the classic definition, it is the process whereby we decide who gets what, when, and how. Therefore, the political is personal i.e. every aspect of our lives, even the most private, is shaped by the policies and actions of government, of businesses, of non-profit organizations, of public and private institutions, and of the masses of our fellow citizens.

From this premise follow three corollaries. First, whatever our guiding principles mine are freedom, equality, solidarity, and rationality we can only implement them, if at all, through the political process. Second, the less we exert our political influence, the more the influence of others will count. Third, the quality of public policy depends on the quality of the inputs into the political process.

I have been politically active for over twenty years, since I was a teenager, because I feel compassion for others and because I see the quality of my own life as deeply intertwined with that of every other human being. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, asserted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; we could add that pollution anywhere is a threat to a livable environment everywhere, economic instability anywhere is a threat to economic stability everywhere, bigotry anywhere is a threat to tolerance everywhere, and so on.

I often despair, as I behold the tides of ignorance, stupidity, inatinality, and selfish greed. Each time, however, my confidence is restored by a few bright, compassionate, and committed individuals. They span the gamut of socio-economic, ethnic, and personal characteristics, but they share the ability to think independently; envision a better world; identify, diagnose, and solve problems; and lead or inspire others. What they often lack is a venue for fully articulating their arguments and their vision, sharing them with a large audience, and debating them with others who are equally capable of thinking clearly about public affairs and who are equally inclined to make their views public.

Oregon's Future is this venue. It seeks to foster sincere debate and pragmatic problem-solving revealing consensus where it exists and, where it is absent, clarifying why. In short, it is but another means to the end I have always pursued: a better society, i.e. one that is more free, just, compassionate, rational, and sustainable.

# Readers' Letters

## Fairness on the Farm

Roberto Franco's article "Who Makes the Garden Grow?" (Oregon's Future, Summer 1999) paints an incomplete picture and perpetuates some myths about agricultural labor in Oregon.

First, asserting that farmers' net income is directly proportional to the value of their crops shows little understanding of agriculture. Farmers, in most instances, are price takers, with no opportunity or ability to establish the selling price of their crop on the market. Unfortunately, the farmers' cost of production including machinery, land, buildings, and other equipment are fixed. Most growers borrow money from lenders to cover their variable annual operating expenses, such as seed, pesticides, fertilizer, and labor. Despite millions in sales, there may be little net income left after expenses. Farmers' costs have risen over 15 percent since 1992 while the prices they receive for their commodities has actually gone down.

In 1997, according to the latest Census of Agriculture, Oregon growers sold \$3 billion of agricultural products. They spent \$2.2 billion to produce these commodities. The average net income gross income minus all operating expenses per farm for 1997 was \$21,384. Operating expenses do not include principal payments for land and equipment. After all of these costs are deducted very little is left to pay for family living expenses. That is why most of Oregon's farmers or their spouses also work off the farm.

In 1997, Oregon's farmers paid \$525 million in salaries and wages for hired farm workers. That is 24 percent of total farm expenses and the highest single category of farm production costs. In many counties in the Willamette Valley where nursery and field crops are grown, labor alone accounts for 30 to 45 percent of production expenses more than is spent on seed, fertilizer, fuels, rent and property taxes together.

Some would have us believe that there are few if any laws protecting farm workers and that even those are not enforced. Both assertions are not substantiated by the facts.

The same laws and restrictions apply to hiring minors and adults for seasonal work; whether they are neighbor kids or migrants makes no difference. All provisions of state and federal human rights and non-discrimination laws apply, including prohibitions against discrimination based on race, color, age, sex, religion, disability and marital status. Farm employers are required to train employees in the safe use of equipment and chemicals, provide protective equipment and clothing, post notices and keep records of chemical applications, and provide decontamination facilities, to name a few.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture's handbook of rules for farmers is over 100 pages long and the Oregon Occupational Health and Safety Division has 688 pages of rules that farmers must follow to protect farm employees. Both state and federal agencies enforce these laws.

Oregon farmers have also taken steps to deal with misunderstandings with farm workers. Paolo and Marta Garcia (503-981-8042) operate a grower-funded on the ground ombudsman program out of the Woodburn-based House of Zion Church. Call them and find out about some positive things being done. The Oregon Department of Agriculture operates a mediation program for labor disputes that involve formal complaints filed through the Oregon Legal Services Corporation. Out of 30 cases handled in the past two to three years, 95 percent have been settled in mediation. This is an extremely successful program that has benefited all parties involved by avoiding protracted litigation that is costly and generally ends without either party being fully satisfied.

# Readers Letters

(cont'd)

Finally, Oregon farm workers are among the highest paid in the nation. In July 1999, the most recent data available, farm workers in Oregon and Washington averaged over eight dollars per hour. That is about the same as preschool teachers. Jobs requiring more skill and experience can pay up to \$17.22/hr. Experienced tree and vineyard pruners average \$12.94/hr. Workers doing spraying and application of chemicals average \$12.35/hr. Farm equipment operators earned \$9.53/hr. In no case can a worker be paid less than Oregon's highest-in-the-nation minimum wage of \$6.50/hr. In many Oregon communities college-age students and other non-migrants work on farms because the pay is better than for jobs in retail or fast food.

The bottom line is this: Oregon's family farmers know better than anyone the importance of a reliable work force to care for and harvest our nation's crops. The consumers who enjoy year-round fresh produce and abundance in all types of foods may never realize it, but you can bet your local farmer does.

Dave Dillon  
Communications Director  
Oregon Farm Bureau

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## Ethics and e-commerce

As the Internet becomes the latest panacea for this country's ills and the public's faith in the Dow Jones Industrial Average climbs as fast as the average itself, it was refreshing to read Gordon Dickey's article "Prosperity and Poverty in Oregon" (Oregon's Future, Summer 1999).

Dickey touches on the underside of the stock market boom and of the supposedly shrinking unemployment rate— an underside that most of us seem willing to ignore. The rising tide in Oregon and in the rest of the country has not raised all ships. In fact, many of them have been chained to the bottom of the sea and are being sucked under the waves.

Or perhaps we honestly fail to see the dark side of the boom. We seem to have been so seduced by the elegance of such words as synergy and stock split that we are unable to recognize or act to avert these simple facts. The written word will defeat the illiterate as thoroughly on the web page as it has on the book page. The masses who have nothing to do with the stock market will struggle all the same to feed their children and make it to work on time, regardless of the performance of Warren Buffett's portfolio.

We may well be a healthy society. We may not. Either way, the health of this society has much less to do with economic prosperity than with whether we use things and love people, or vice versa.

Ian Crawford  
Tigard

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