

Nevada looking at small farms being economic engine

By Anne Knowles, Northern Nevada Business Weekly

Small farms need to flourish if Nevada's new emphasis on agriculture is to produce results.

Gov. Brian Sandoval said he is revising the state's economic development plan to focus on farming as one of several industries vital to Nevada's future.

"Agriculture is a primary economic engine for the great state of Nevada," Sandoval said at a Carson City breakfast hosted by the Northern Nevada Development Authority last month. "Agriculture is going to be part of the huge growth the state will see."

Many large farms and ranches dot Nevada's landscape, especially in Elko and Eureka counties, where the average-size operation is 4,573 acres and 9,110 acres, respectively, according to a new state report on agriculture.

The report estimates the economic impact of agriculture in the state at \$5.3 billion. Northwest Nevada accounted for \$2.2 billion of that total; northeast Nevada for \$235.1 million.

But due to nature's constraints, expansion will have to emanate largely from farms ranging in size from one acre to 500 acres.

"Almost all the valleys, the hydrologic basins, are closed basins," says Jay Davison, specialist, alternative crops and forage, University of Nevada, Reno, Cooperative Extension. "You can't start a large farm because of these limitations on water.

You can't go from sagebrush to alfalfa."

A peek at the future of agriculture in the state will come during the Small Farm Conference Feb. 21-23 at John Ascuaga's Nugget in Sparks.

The conference highlights crops new to Nevada – hops, for instance – and technologies such as hoop houses to bolster high-desert farming. Hops is being tested right now in northern Nevada by Neal Workman, a Fallon farmer, who with the help of UNR's Cooperative Extension, planted more than 600 hops plants of multiple varieties on about one acre of his 300-acre farm.

"My dad and I talked about it, doing something different, diversification," says Workman. "We have our necks out a little bit, but it is sort of fun. It should be interesting."

Workman has spoken to Great Basin Brewery in Reno and sees some interest from Northern California breweries that prefer a locally-grown crop. But, like grapes, hops takes three years to assess, says UNCE's Davison, who is working with Workman and is also planning on planting some hops at the Main Station UNR farm in Reno.

Workman says his brother is successfully growing teff, another crop highlighted in the state report.

Desert Oasis Teff, owned and operated by Dave Eckart and John Getto in Fallon, has seen demand for the grain double to more than a million pounds last year. The company farms its own grain and works with interested farmers to grow teff as a rotation crop on existing farms. According to UNCE's Davison, Desert Oasis Teff recently purchased property in which to begin milling and processing the teff, one of the gaps in the state's agricultural industry identified by the state's report.

One of the biggest hurdles for small producers is finding a market for their product because lower their smaller volumes can sometimes mean less interest from the distribution channel

and buyers.

“If you’re going to supply somebody and tell them I’ll give you X amount of cantaloupe, for example, you better be able to supply them with it,” says UNCE’s Davison.

Some small farmers sell a specialty crop such as carrots directly to other larger farms, such as Fallon’s Lattin Farms, says Davison, or directly to local restaurants and consumers through farmer’s markets and so-called community-supported agriculture subscriptions.

Grow For Me Sustainable Farm takes the community-supported concept a step further, or a step backward to its roots. The 97-acre farm on the California border 25 minutes outside Reno offers tomatoes, lettuce, okra, apples, pears and other produce, as well as chicken, lamb, pork and beef to about 25 members who come on Sundays to pick their own food.

The farm’s subscribers, who apply for membership, also have a say in what gets grown.

“I’ve been doing it five years now and most of the families rejoin,” says Wendy Baroli, owner of the farm dubbed Girlfarm by one of its restaurant customers, Dish Café. “They have a commitment to how you eat and prepare food. I manage your farm for you.”

Baroli and others hope the state stands by its stated commitment to agriculture by helping to nourish the small farmers it needs to grow the industry. She’s waiting to testify before the Reno City Council in March when it considers whether to rezone the UNR farm near Mill Street and McCarran Boulevard for commercial development.

“When you think about the governor’s statement, it is almost counterintuitive to look at the extension station as an ATM,” says Baroli, who says the UNR farm is vital for the training of new farmers and providing a place for them to experiment.

But she says the governor has the final say in whether the property is developed no matter what the City Council decides.

The Nevada Legislature may also have a say in helping small farmers when it considers two bills that would let farmers use home kitchens to turn their crops such as raspberries into value-added products such as raspberry jam.

“A small farm can’t compete on prices due to economics of scale,” says NevadaGrown’s Louhela. “This opens up their opportunities.”