

4 County Counting

Statistical change is one thing, but it's funding the programs that counts

Statistics aren't everything, but state revenue reports will be taking on a different look and it should benefit Hood River County and the rest of eastern Oregon.

Sen. Ted Ferrioli, whose 28th District includes Hood River County, has helped change the reporting system used by the state so that new information will have a county-by-county breakdown of employment, income, population, and poverty rates. The change is intended to take into account what he calls "the unique characteristics of different parts of the state."

It's a move in the right direction, though the senator's term "Appalachia of the West" to describe all of eastern Oregon is a label that's probably unfair to Odell and Prineville, but his point is taken about economic disadvantage east of the Cascades. (Please turn to articles on page A1.)

Hood River Fruit growers say they are facing a crisis, with a projected loss in 2001 of almost \$95,000 per 39-acre unit of orchard, according to the Hood River-based Tractor Coalition, which cites Oregon State University Extension Service figures.

Yet the fruit industry provides 3,220 full-time equivalent jobs in Hood River County, earning an average (statewide) of \$8.35 per hour, according to the orchardists of the Tractor Coalition.

Hood River, facing the likely closure of its last lumber mill, Hanel Lumber Co. in Odell, along with a downturn in the fruit markets, in some ways resembles the Malheur County town of Nyssa, where the largest sugar-beet processing plant is about to close. Yet this county's location, topography, and remaining employment mix still distinguish us from Nyssa, Bend, or John Day.

Eastern Oregon ought to be analyzed, economically, as a distinct, though not separate, region from Oregon west of the Cascades. The us-them feeling between the two sides of the state should not be encouraged. Hood River County straddles the Cascade divide, and there is identification with both the agricultural, sparsely-populated eastern part of the state as well as with the expanding Portland metropolitan area based on our proximity.

Yet combined with the kind of data issued by Hood River's Tractor Coalition, Sen. Ferrioli's move is a welcome statistical development that will serve the economic interests of the eastern part of the state, in the long run.

Our legislators are encouraged to bring to Salem practical measures to go with the geographically-based system of organizing and assessing the political data.

For instance, they should look at the effect of any cuts to programs that help families of young and yet-to-be born children: according to the Children First 2001 report, issued last week, Hood River County is among the highest counties in the state in the categories of number of low-birthweight infants, infant mortality, and child deaths.

The report states that child abuse and neglect are worsening in Oregon — east and west of the Cascades. About one in 75 children in Oregon is a known victim of abuse or neglect, and any social worker can tell you that in matters such as these, children feel the effects of economic change in unique and painful ways.

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