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Leaders should recognize ag's value

Updated: Friday, January 18, 2013 12:11 PM

Editorial

It is common for government to chase industrial development. Among the current favorites are "green" energy, "sustainability" and high technology. In the eyes of many in government, those industries are the wave of the future.

To attract them, government leaders work hard to come up with tax incentives, subsidies and other gimmicks that will convince corporations to locate in their backyards.

In the process, though, the businesses that are already there -- some for more than 100 years -- are often ignored or even berated. In the case of agriculture some in government see a productive farm field as nothing more than a "shovel-ready" site for other types of development.

It is too rare that agriculture is seen and appreciated for what it is -- a valuable industry that produces food and fiber, creates jobs and generates economic activity.

Some in government get it. A recent example is the Marion County Board of Commissioners in Oregon. Last week the commissioners unanimously passed a resolution that is, in essence, recognition that agriculture makes the county's economic wheels turn.

"Agriculture is Marion County's number one industry and at Marion County we are proud to support our farmers and the vast array of businesses that represent this significant part of our local economy," Commissioner Patty Milne said in a press release.

Marion County is the heart of Oregon's Willamette Valley. It is also home of the state capital, Salem, and just south of the Portland area and its sprawl. For the commission to stand up and acknowledge that agriculture, with more than \$616.8 million in annual revenue, is a driver of the county's economy is remarkable.

Around the West, we see plenty of examples of governments at all levels that don't get it when it comes to agriculture. Across the Cascade Mountains from Marion County is Grant County, Ore. Over the years, misguided federal forest policies and swarms of environmental lawsuits have all but shut down that county's timber industry and its mills. As a result the county has an unemployment rate topping 13 percent. Even Gov. John Kitzhaber, a Democrat, has commented on the federal government's poor management of forests in Oregon.

In Idaho, the city of Caldwell has filed eminent domain proceedings to take some of the local irrigation district's canals. Such a move demonstrates a total lack of understanding or respect for agriculture.

In Washington state, farmland has been transformed into every possible use, from baseball diamonds to car

dealers.

California is the poster child in the governmental "I like agriculture but I hate farms and ranches" campaign. State government there has been hounding agriculture with torrents of air and water regulations. Combined with environmental lawsuits that threaten water supplies, agriculture in that state can best be described as abused.

Despite the abuse, every one of these states is a leader in several areas of agricultural production. Washington produces most of the nation's apples. Oregon is tops in various berries and hazelnuts, grass seed, Christmas trees and several other crops.

Idaho is tops in potatoes and one of the largest dairy-producing states. And California is an agricultural powerhouse, outproducing every other state -- despite the lack of respect it gets from government.

We'd like to see more government leaders at all levels recognize agriculture for what it is -- a clean, renewable, sustainable industry that also creates jobs and economic activity that reverberates through the region's economy.