

Tour highlights diversity in Ore.

Region's school administrators get an education about job market

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SILVERTON, Ore. — The closest some high school students may come to working in agriculture is handling meat and produce when fixing burgers at a fast-food restaurant.

If a recent tour of area farms accomplishes anything, however, it will be to better acquaint school administrators and students with the variety of jobs available in agriculture and the practical preparation high school ag programs can offer.

"Unfortunately, nowadays most kids don't have the opportunity to get experience at different jobs," said Dan Hammelman of Dan Hammelman Farms near Silverton.

So high school ag programs are critical. When asked what they look for in a job applicant, Dan and Bernadette Hammelman said they need responsible employees willing to do a variety of different jobs.

"When they do have a background in ag programs in high school, it is a big help," Dan added.

This was the testimony ag employers shared with a group of teachers and school officials during the annual Administrator's Agriculture Tour, hosted this year by the Capital FFA District in Silverton. The Hammelmans were among ag business owners who welcomed educators onto their property on Aug. 13 for the tour.

"It's great to get the administrators out to see what's going on in agriculture," said Perry Burlison, an ag teacher at Woodburn High School.

What was going on that day included clipping and packaging of



OBSERVING AGRICULTURE — Perry Burlison, an agriculture instructor at Woodburn High School, watches Tracy Unrein sort, weigh and cut dried flowers at Dan Hammelman Farms near Silverton, Ore. Burlison was part of the annual Administrator's Agriculture Tour, hosted this year by the Capital FFA District. (Capital Press photo by David Carkhuff)

dried flowers at Hammelmans' dried flower business. Other tour stops included Quest International food processing plant, Loe Seed Cleaners and the Oregon Garden project, the nursery industry showcase arboretum under construction in Silverton.

Diversity seemed to be the lesson for the day. When the Hammelmans said an employee needs to be willing to take on a variety of tasks, their comment was equally appropriate to agriculture at large in the Willamette Valley. Tour participants learned that ag programs need to educate students about the sheer variety of jobs in agriculture.

Cynthia Richardson, assistant principal at McKay High School in Salem, said variety and technology impressed her during the tour.

"I'm from Texas, and we have a farm in Texas, but we were basically in hay production and cattle. To come here and see the dif-

"To come here and see the different kinds of agriculture, how agriculture has advanced, is amazing."

Cynthia Richardson, assistant principal at McKay High School, on coming to Oregon

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Richardson said all students should "have their eyes opened" to the different occupations available to them, including those in agriculture.

"I think we need a more practical approach," including on-the-job work experience to motivate students to enter the work

field, she said.

Dan Hammelman cautioned that a farm job involves a unique setting, with the positive aspects of outdoor work and down-to-earth labor, but also the negatives of heat and dust.

"You have to be aware it's not like working at Mervyn's as a cashier."

The pay may be comparable, though the means of receiving it can be different. The Hammelmans offer a piece rate, which is incentive pay based on productivity.

"We just can't pay the \$9 and \$10 an hour" straight wage that a department store might offer, he said. Instead, workers can earn roughly \$7 to \$12 an hour, depending on how efficient they are.

With the upcoming increase in Oregon's minimum wage from \$6 to \$6.50, high school students will have a tougher time competing for those higher-value jobs, especially if they aren't prepared, Dan said.