

## **The Case for Solar Farms in Wasco County: A Story About Our Land, Community, and the Future**

By Shelly Woodside Dean, Margaret Holmes Tibbets, and the Barbra Ambrose Family

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The history of the Woodside family ranch in Southern Wasco County goes back nearly 150 years to the first wheat and cattle ranches on Juniper Flat. The ranch as it currently stands began in 1898 with the marriage of L.D. "Dee" Woodside to Estella Truman, the eldest granddaughter of Hampton Kelly, one of the earliest settlers and a founder of the first community on Juniper Flat. Our family has run the ranch continually since that time through good times and bad, with the one constant being change.

The Ambrose family history is also steeped in the history of the farming and cattle operations on Juniper Flat. The ancestors of Barbra Ambrose were the Endersbys, who were original members of the Wapinitia Cattle Association. The Woodside and Endersby families worked side by side farming and raising cattle and spent many years grazing large herds of cattle in the Mt. Hood National Forest.

Five generations of the Woodside and Endersby families were raised, educated, and nurtured in this community. We have built our lives in Wasco County, working hard to build successful farming and ranching businesses while contributing to the community at large through our family's long years of community involvement and service through the schools, sports, volunteer fire and ambulance service, 4-H, and the Wasco County Fair. We remain committed to Juniper Flat, Maupin, and South Wasco County as a whole.

From a business standpoint, landowners like the Woodside and Ambrose families are facing real fixed pressures—property taxes, insurance costs, water rights, labor costs, rising seed and fertilizer costs, and rising fuel costs are all contributing to the pressures. If the land cannot generate enough income to meet those obligations, then continuing to engage in low yield production isn't land preservation— it's a bad business decision and a financial drain. When farmers and ranchers like us reach this point, evaluating alternative uses isn't giving up "our" farmland, it's about keeping the property viable and the family afloat.

## **That's why we are vocal supporters of solar farms.**

For generations, we residents of Southern Wasco County have acted as stewards of this land, raising crops, managing livestock, and doing our best to balance our own needs and ambitions with the land's carrying capacity and its natural abundance. As hotter, drier summers have made that tightrope more challenging than ever, solar farms have emerged as one strong option for those of us who are eager to lighten the load on strained agricultural water supplies while preserving precious land for future generations. The loss of valuable forest service leases from the federal government required local ranchers to significantly reduce their cattle herds beginning in the 1970s, resulting in additional financial challenges for area families.

## **The numbers don't lie.**

There is a real tension that a lot of rural farming families are dealing with right now: the gap between how farmland looks to outsiders, and what it actually produces as a business. At its core, the distinction is about productivity—not appearance. “Good farmland” is not defined by providing pastoral or scenic vistas, but by whether the land can consistently produce crops at yields that cover production costs and leave a margin for profit. In Southern Wasco County, lower rainfall typically limits wheat production to 35–45 bushels per acre, with those yields falling even further in dry years. On the Woodside and Ambrose ranches, typical yields of wheat were rarely more than 25–30 bushels per acre. It is increasingly difficult to reach a break-even point at today's market prices, which is currently estimated by the OSU Extension Service to be over 60 bushels per acre. When you combine thin or rocky soil, low moisture retention, limited irrigation, cost of farming equipment with those low yields per acre, it becomes economically unsustainable. For our families it has become more about cutting our losses than earning a living. The economic pressure is real, and it can be overwhelming.

**Let us be clear:** We love our land and this community. We feel lucky to have been born and raised in such a special place, and we want to help ensure that future generations of our families can share in what our common ancestors built for us all.

For that to happen, we need to do what rural communities have always done: adapt to the changing realities of the land and market opportunities.

## **Adapting to changing realities**

For our families, by leasing a portion of our land to BrightNight, a well-respected and experienced solar power and energy storage developer, we are doing just that. We are keeping our family's ranches whole, and continuing the legacy for our children. In addition, our decisions will help to bring much needed jobs and tax revenue into our struggling County.

The project that BrightNight intends to install on our land is an approximately 6,700-acre solar installation which will rely on a system of concrete-free posts that keep the solar panels above the ground. This low-impact project which will leave much of the existing landscape intact, will give the land time to rest, will preserve the top soil, and will provide shade that slows water evaporation from the natural ground cover in our increasingly arid climate. In addition, natural ground cover will be clipped and kept low to reduce combustible fuels, and the layout of the panels will help to create a natural firebreak to help slow or reduce spread of wildfires. The layout of the photovoltaic panels will help facilitate wildlife corridors, and additional acres will be preserved to encourage wildlife abundance. Our region is rightly known for its incredible outdoor lifestyle. The project design will ensure that wildlife and hunting corridors are protected, irrigation ditches remain accessible, and generous setbacks keep our beautiful rivers and creeks healthy and open. The beautiful views of the mountains will continue to be unobstructed.

At the end of the project's lifespan, all equipment will be removed, and the land will be restored to its original condition. We want to emphasize that this land restoration is paid for by a financial bond, using regulator-reviewed cost estimates, to cover full decommissioning and land restoration at the end of the project's life. This bond is set prior to the construction of the project. It will be in place for the life of the project to ensure that cleanup is paid for by the project owner, not local landowners or taxpayers, even if ownership or finances change.

## **An investment in Wasco County's future**

This project represents a critical investment in the region's future. [A recent study by the economic research firm E3](#) found that the Pacific Northwest is looking at a 9 GW supply/demand gap by 2030. That is only three and a half years away...and we're

already at risk of rolling blackouts. That's a big problem for cities and manufacturing centers, but it's also a big problem here in Wasco County. Rural communities rely on power as much as anyone.

Yes, this is a big change, but we see it as a necessary evolution that will allow our community to thrive while we protect the things that matter most to our families-our heritage.

The conflicts tend to arise when neighbors or the public judge a legally permitted business opportunity based on traditional uses and aesthetics. For some, open fields seem like they should always remain open, even if they aren't in a park or protected area. But that perspective does not account for private ownership rights or long-term business sustainability. Responsible stewardship sometimes means making a hard pivot-whether that is changing crops, leasing land, diversifying income, or even converting the land to different legally permitted use.

Not everyone in our community shares our enthusiasm for solar farms. It's a new way of working the land, and that isn't always comfortable. We don't pretend that this is a simple issue, and we don't expect to persuade everyone to see things as our families do. Our goal is simply to offer our perspective, as long time ranch owners. At the end of the day, we will still be neighbors. We support members of our community to seek the highest and best use of their land, as we are doing for ours.

Change is never easy, and it's understandable that people have concerns. This is an opportunity for our community to come together and consider the positive outcomes for our future-while respecting the ability of landowners to make decisions about their own property.