



The Oregonian

Overcoming the urban-rural divide

Eastern Oregon - Grant County ranchers welcome 22 Portland students into their world

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A newborn calf probably owes its life to some city slicker kids from Portland who went to Eastern Oregon to discover what rural life is really all about.

Two students from Sunnyside Environmental School found the calf on the ground when they went into a pasture with a rancher from Monument to check on mother cows. The calf couldn't rise in the sub-zero weather, and its mother couldn't seem to help her baby.

Maria Chapman, 13, and Maddy Meininger, 12, helped get the freezing calf inside, then they bottle-fed it and named it Blackie.

"It made me feel really good inside," Maria said. In fact, she has a new ambition now. She wants to get a job as a cowhand when she's old enough: "To me, being on the ranch is like home. It's so comfortable. I belong there."

The two girls were among 22 youngsters from the K-8 school who visited Grant County last week at the invitation of area ranchers hoping to bridge a urban-rural divide.

The split opened up last year when some students from Sunnyside testified at a public hearing in favor of wolf protections, reciting poetry and singing a rap song. The display offended some ranchers who say they need to guard their livestock from wolves if the predators establish a population in Oregon.

The children were selected from 40 applicants, and priority was given to six who had testified at the hearing last March. The visit went so well that everyone is making plans to do it again.

"It was probably one of the most positive and most wonderful things I have ever been involved with," said Jan Zuckerman, a Sunnyside teacher who was a chaperone on the trip. "The families there were just incredibly welcoming and kind, and I think the kids learned we have a lot in common, which is probably what we all need to learn in this state."

Her 13-year-old son, Sandro, helped feed cows and horses near the town of Seneca when it was 20-below. Other kids rode horses and tossed hay to cattle from the back of a horse-drawn ranch wagon. Some had elk steak for breakfast and marveled at the wide open spaces and small populations of the towns.

Others were astonished at the jack-of-all-trade skills of ranchers, who feed cattle hay all winter, manage forage in summer, oversee breeding programs, fix their own equipment and try to protect streams, meadows and forest lands.

"They were really smart," said Sandro Zuckerman. "They taught me a lot of stuff. They knew a lot about the environment."

It was rare that anyone talked about a wolf management plan adopted in December by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission and the possibility that wolves might migrate soon into Oregon from Idaho, said Dennis Reynolds, chairman of the county's Board of Commissioners who also hosted some of the students.

One girl told him she had worried about finding herself in conflict with the ranching families or having to pretend to change her philosophy just to get along. "She didn't find that," he said. "It was never our intent to talk specifically about wolves. We just wanted to create an understanding of rural living."

The students tried to show the ranchers they were good kids and could work hard, said Maureen Hosty, an Oregon State University 4-H wildlife steward extension agent at Sunnyside.

"The kids felt like it broke down a lot of stereotypes on both sides," she said. "We have a lot more in common than we do differences."

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