

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 18, 2008

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Growers fight back on farmland vandalism

With theft and vandalism on rural properties on the rise, the Washington County Farm Bureau is working to let would-be thieves know that their rural crimes will not go unnoticed or unpunished.

At its meeting in Hillsboro on April 15, the Washington County Farm Bureau recognized two of its members, Steven Vuylsteke and Bob VanderZanden, whose quick thinking and work with the police resulted in the capture of farmland vandals. Vuylsteke and VanderZanden each received a check through the Oregon Farm Bureau Reward Program, which offers up to \$1,000 for case-solving information on felonies committed on farms and ranches. (A program sign must be posted on the property of a Farm Bureau member for the reward to be granted. Country Insurance & Financial Services is also a partner in the program.)

In January, Vuylsteke reported a man whose pickup truck got stuck in a field of perennial rye grass, owned by Washington County Farm Bureau Board member Dave Vanasche. The driver had decided not to wait for traffic making its way through a road detour close to Vanasche's farm in Cornelius. Instead, he attempted to drive through the field of valuable crops — and got stuck.

When Vuylsteke arrived on the scene, the driver said he would pay him if Vuylsteke would help him pull out his truck. Instead, Vuylsteke called the police. The resulting damage to the approximately 130 yards of Vanasche's perennial ryegrass field was estimated at \$1,610. If the driver had made it all the way through the field, the loss would have been much higher.

"While some people see 'just a field' or even a playground, these crops represent our livelihood," says Vanasche. "We have to make people aware that destructive behavior on farmland is going to cost them."

The police determined that the owner of the truck was intoxicated, and in February, he was sentenced to 18 months bench probation, 40 hours of community service, and a one-year driver's license suspension.

"I didn't know there was a Farm Bureau reward program — I would have turned him in anyway," says Vuylsteke, a grass seed farmer also from Cornelius who will be joining the Marines in May. "It helps if people are aware of rural crime. They should call the police if they see something that's not right, like a vehicle in a field that shouldn't be there."

In June of 2006, Bob VanderZanden helped apprehend another vandal who caused damage to Vanasche's property.

For six weeks a man had been driving an ATV through farmland between Cornelius and North Plains, destroying valuable tall fescue, perennial rye grass, and red clover crops in his wake. But no one had been able to catch him.

After another sighting by Vanasche, VanderZanden went to investigate the area where the driver had seemed to disappear. He came across the garage where the ATV was held. The next day, he and Vanasche saw the driver ripping through the fields yet again and were able to direct the police to his home. Approximately \$7,500 worth of damage was caused to Vanasche's fields, with the total damage, including that of neighboring farms, reaching about \$10,000.

Because of previous criminal activity, the driver was sentenced to six months jail time, three years probation, fines, and compensation to the farmers.

When VanderZanden collected his Farm Bureau reward, he said, "I've been putting these reward signs up for 40 years, but I never thought I'd collect on it!"

VanderZanden's farm hasn't escaped crime either. A few years ago, about \$3,500 worth of tools were stolen out of his shed.

At the meeting Vanasche also recognized Jim King, Washington County Agent with Country Insurance & Financial Services, a partner in the reward program, and Andrew Erwin of the Washington County District Attorney's Office.

"The Washington County District Attorney's office and Sheriff's Department have been very cooperative with us on these cases of rural crime," says Vanasche. "We wanted to thank them tonight for all the good work they do."

"Rural theft and vandalism is a statewide problem," says Vanasche. "We hope the Oregon Farm Bureau Reward Program and the signs we post are deterrents for thieves. But there needs to be more public awareness that vandalism and crime on farms won't be tolerated."

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Photos – from left, Andrew Erwin of the Washington County District Attorney's Office, \$500 reward winner Steven Vuylsteke, \$1,000 reward winner Bob VanderZanden, Washington County Farm Bureau Board member Dave Vanasche, and Jim King, Washington County Agent with Country Insurance & Financial Services

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* Note to Editors: "Farm Bureau" is a registered trademark; please capitalize in all cases.

In 2007, Oregon Farm Bureau celebrated its 75th Anniversary as the state's largest general agriculture organization. Farm Bureau has more than 8,000 member families professionally engaged in agriculture in all 36 Oregon counties.

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