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## NEWS

# Proposed large chicken ranch ruffles feathers of neighbors around Scio

**Bill Poehler** Salem Statesman Journal

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SCIO – Glenda and Monty Brooking tired of the chaotic city life in Tualatin and wanted a peaceful place in the country.

Two years ago, they found it on a secluded “mini-farm” at the end of a dirt road, surrounded by farm fields mid-way between Jefferson and Scio where the only distractions are the North Santiam River a quarter-mile away and the stunning view of the snow-capped Cascade Mountain range to the east.

There are days when the only traffic by her house is her driving down the dirt road to go to work or neighbor Cassandra Schrunk riding a horse, with a three-legged dog trailing behind.

Last summer, a neighboring farm was put up for sale and the Brookings briefly considered purchasing it, but the advertised price was too steep.

The person who did buy the property, Eric Simon, has proposed to turn about 20 of the acres of what is now grass seed into 12, 60-foot by 600-foot chicken coops – and an accompanying barn for manure and wood shavings – to raise 580,000 broiler chickens at a time for Foster Farms.

The Brookings' paradise could soon be changed forever.

“I’ve never lived next to a chicken farm, so I don’t know,” Glenda Brooking said.

## 'They bought a place isolated'

Brooking and a number of neighbors are concerned about how the proposed chicken ranch will impact their tranquil piece of the world.

They're concerned about how their quiet arm could soon have multiple semis driving on the dirt road past it multiple times a day, how the view from her living room would change from a field of fescue to large white barns with huge fans on the exterior -- all servicing hundreds of thousands of chickens.

The estimated size of each flock is 580,000 chickens, with the facility growing six flocks per year. That adds up to 3.4 million chickens a year — a lot of poultry going down the skinny road in front of the Brookings' house.

**Fire response:** Response times spike in Marion County Fire District after levy-forced layoffs

“And I totally understand that. I do totally understand that,” said Simon, who owns a similar ranch in Brownsville. “They bought a place isolated and stuff. I understand.

“I was telling Glenda, our nearest fans are going to be 1,200 feet away from her place. The fans we're going to use most of the time are going to be another 600 feet away. I personally have a very nice place that's 800 feet away from the fans. My daughter got married in our backyard this summer. It's very livable to be around. It's very clean.”

Simon plans to start construction on the ranch in May or June, even though there has been no public process so far and neighbors didn't learn of it until weeks ago.

Some of the neighbors are concerned about the lack of opportunity for public input, although the Oregon Department of Agriculture says there will be a future public comment period.

Other people are concerned about the potential environmental impacts considering the proximity to the North Santiam River.

“This whole general area is a bad idea,” Cassandra Schrunk said. “We got Thomas Creek. We’ve got the Santiam. We’re at the main base of the watershed. Let’s just fill that up with chicken farms. It doesn’t seem smart to me. There’s better places in the world than the Willamette Valley.”

## **Neighboring fifth-generation farm**

In 1951, Harland Eastman purchased a farm between Scio and Jefferson along the banks of the North Santiam River. Harland and his son, Burl, cleared out trees with dynamite to expand the farm closer to the river.

“They cleared this river bottom for farmland,” said Christina Eastman, one of four generations of Eastmans to still live on the family farm that borders the proposed chicken ranch.

For five generations, the Eastman family has farmed the property. Grass seed is now the major crop produced there.

But over the years, they’ve also lost large portions of the land as the North Santiam River has changed course and taken over, despite mitigation attempts including adding rip rap to the river bank.

“One time we were down there, it took out a chunk of land the size of a corn truck. Just boom, into the water,” Eastman said. “We had seven fir trees that were going north to south, one by one in the river.”

The North Santiam River, which is a habitat for environmentally-threatened Chinook salmon and steelhead and the source of drinking water for cities including Salem, Stayton and Jefferson, is about 1,400 feet from the proposed chicken ranch.

A 2018 report published by the Environmental Integrity Project, a non-profit that advocates for enforcement of environmental laws, found large-scale broiler chicken operations like the one Simon is proposing produce tons of ammonia per year.

**Mink farms:** An Oregon mink farm has a COVID-19 outbreak among animals and workers

The Environmental Protection Agency has found ammonia toxicity can lead to the death of aquatic animals in nearby water bodies.

"Do you want to come and eat when you're smelling chicken manure or smelling the ammonia? It's not nice," said Teresa Anderson, a farmer from Stayton.

And Eastman estimates that the river has shifted 3/4 mile southwest towards the property in her 56 years.

"Eventually this chicken farm is going to fall into the river," said Nancy Hanna, who lives on a neighboring farm. "I'm not opposed to Foster Farms raising chickens, but surely there's a place in eastern Oregon or way out where you're not sitting on the North Santiam River."

## **Becoming a chicken rancher**

In 2000, Simon bought his first chicken ranch in Brownsville and moved his young family into a house on the property.

It had two barns that dated to the 1950s for poultry raising and he started contracting with Foster Farms to raise 40,000 chickens at a time.

Over the years, he built new coops the size of the ones he's proposing to build in Scio, expanded his operation and started a second business, Ideal Ag Supply, which provides equipment for climate control and ventilation for farmers like him.

Raising broiler chickens requires constant work, from when they show up as day-old chicks and need 90-degree heat to survive until they are picked up by the processor 45 to 50 days later.

In 2019, Oregon had 508 Confined Animal Feeding Operations, an agricultural enterprise where animals are raised in a confined situation, like the one Simon is proposing in Scio.

**Earthquake concern:** Detroit Dam earthquake concern to bring lower summer water levels in reservoir

Simon said Foster Farms has been losing farmers to retirement and advertising for new ranchers in recent years.

“It’s very hard and very expensive,” Simon said. “Finally, last year, they kind of sweetened the pot a little more.”

Last year, a customer came to Simon and was interested in building a chicken ranch. Simon instructed his children, who are Realtors, to find a location for him.

They found the farm on Jefferson-Scio Road, but it didn’t meet his customer’s needs for a house and the customer passed. But the site had access to natural gas, electricity and water rights, and it was too good for Simon to let go.

“I couldn’t pass up that opportunity because that’s an opportunity for me, it’s an opportunity to display all the latest and greatest of what we do,” he said. “There will be stuff on that farm years past stuff we do here.”

He closed on the property outside Scio in February, but had started the process of getting the necessary permits and approvals six months earlier.

He received a permit from Linn County in February for the buildings. But there was no public process as part of that application because it's for agricultural use.

“And part of it, too, Oregon law, agriculture is agriculture and it’s exempt from having to go through the same processes,” said Kendra Kimbirauskas, a Scio farmer.

A grass seed farmer had a two-year lease on the land with its previous owner, but Simon said he negotiated with him so he could develop the land sooner.

He said he intends to build a vegetative barrier including trees and grass around the buildings to keep any dust and smell from going onto neighboring properties.

## Being a good neighbor

Schrunk is the fourth generation to live on the Eastman family farm, and personifies the farm life.

She babysits neighbors' chickens when they go on vacation and takes in bumper – rejected – lambs and raises them.

During September's wildfires, she drove to Lyons with her trailer, helped rescue horses out of burning fields and brought them to her farm.

At one point, she had 15 horses at her home and it took weeks until she could figure out who owned which horses.

“It pays it forward,” Schrunk said.

She currently boards and trains horses on her property and has run businesses including childcare out of her home.

Her property borders the dirt road that would lead to the proposed facility.

The narrow road needs constant maintenance, such as during February's ice storm when the road was blocked with trees. When potholes form, she and the Brookings pitch in to fill them.

**More:** Henry Miller: When a day without a catch is still a great day fishing

“They fly down this road, Amazon does,” Schrunk said. “When they drive by my barn and I train out of that barn, it gets scary for the horses. I about got my butt dumped off in a stall with a FedEx truck that came through and just scared a colt I was on.”

Simon said the property in question came with an easement on the road and that he has applied to Linn County to widen and improve it, including moving a drainage ditch.

“They just said we can't have trucks waiting on the road,” he said.

He said there will be times with multiple trucks per day when the chickens arrive as hatchlings and leave 45 to 50 days later fully grown, but the rest of the time there may be one truck per day bringing feed or people coming to buy manure.

“The rest of the time will be a very, very small amount,” Simon said.

## **Poultry company keeps up with demand**

Foster Farms was founded by Max and Verda Foster in 1939 near Modesto, California and remains in the family's ownership 80 years later.

Over the years, the West Coast company has grown through acquiring other poultry companies, such as when it expanded into the Northwest in 1987 by purchasing Fircrest Farms.

Foster Farms spokesperson Ira Brill said the company owns almost all of its ranches in California – where the majority of its chickens are grown. In Oregon and Washington, the company contracts with growers like Simon.

“It sort of was a historical legacy that we inherited when we bought the producer up there,” Brill said.

Demand for chicken has grown over the years, and Foster Farms is one of the major suppliers to supermarkets like Fred Meyer and Safeway.

Estimates are more than 90% of meat consumed in the United States is grown in large-scale farms like the ones in which Foster Farms chickens are raised.

The chicks raised in northwest farms are hatched at a facility in Oregon City. The feed is processed and distributed from a facility in Aurora and the fully-grown chickens are slaughtered in Kelso, Washington.

“I think the other thing that’s important to really understand is that the advantage of Foster Farms operating in the Pacific Northwest is the product we raise there, we sell there,” Brill said.

## **Dairy:** Neighbors question state oversight of Willamette Valley Cheese dairy

Brill said Foster Farms currently has more than 30 contract growers like Simon in the Northwest.

Brill said the company works closely with contract growers to ensure they are following all state and local regulations in building new operations and regularly inspects the facilities, as does a third party, the American Humane Association, a non-profit that ensures the wellbeing of animals.

Oregon also inspects the operations on a yearly basis.

## **Finally getting a say**

Ranches like the one Simon is proposing require a permit from the state.

Oregon Department of Agriculture spokesperson Andrea Cantu-Schomus said Simon's application will go through a public process, including the release of the draft application and permit to the public, a 35-day public comment period and a public hearing within 30 days of the notice.

But none of that has been scheduled, she said.

She said the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Department of Environmental Quality can then issue a permit as proposed, make changes in response to comments received, or deny the permit.

"Protection of water quality on the surface and in the ground is a critical element of the CAFO program and an important and necessary component of approval," Cantu-Schomus said in an email.

Simon estimates 4,500 tons of manure will be produced each year, and he said it will be sold to organic farmers and trucked offsite. He said any manure and wastewater on the site will be contained at the property and not be in danger of leaching into the groundwater or running into the North Santiam River.



“Our manure is never going to be outside. It won’t ever be exposed to rain,” he said. “It’s either going to be inside the poultry houses or it’s going to go to the manure storage building that will have a concrete floor on it. When the trucks are loaded, they tarp them.”

Thus far, the only outreach about the proposed chicken ranch to neighbors is when Simon had a conversation with Glenda and Monty Brooking after buying the land.

It didn't leave Glenda satisfied, and she plans to be among those who submit comments to the state.

“I’m not happy about the traffic that’s going to be on my road,” she said. “I’m not happy about the smell of the bird poop that goes right beside my house. I’m not happy about the smell, period, if it comes to my house. They’re going to truck truckloads of chicken poop right past my house. That’s a problem.”

*Bill Poehler covers Marion County for the Statesman Journal. Contact him at [bpoehler@statesmanjournal.com](mailto:bpoehler@statesmanjournal.com) or [Twitter.com/bpoehler](https://twitter.com/bpoehler).*