

The jury's in, and Jory's out

MICHAEL ROSE Statesman Journal

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Special interests and apathy have buried Oregon's would-be state soil.

Jory soil, one of several thousand soil types in the Northwest, had a long-shot chance at becoming an official state symbol. After a single hearing in March, a resolution to give Jory official status has died in committee.

Red-hued Jory will remain ordinary Willamette Valley earth, despite pleas from a group of soil scientists. About 20 other states have an official state soil. The idea is to highlight soil's importance as a natural resource.

"This somehow came out that people were talking about a state dirt," said Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland, who sponsored legislation to make Jory an Oregon icon. The state soil never got taken seriously by legislators, who in the last session named the pear as state fruit and selected the Metasequoia, or dawn redwood, as the official state fossil.

Oregon's symbols cover the gamut, from a state insect (Oregon Swallowtail, a butterfly) to a state rock (Thunderegg). Official state recognition can promote a cause or serve as a marketing tool, such as touting pears.

Jory's brush-off shows an aspiring state symbol needs a broad base of support -- and some pizzazz.

State state soil proponents might want to take notes from Guy DiTorrice, a Newport resident who in 2005 led the successful effort to name Metasequoia as the state fossil.

His secret weapon: MacKenzie Smith, a young fossil collector, who gave testimony at hearings.

"It's one thing to say no to a 54-year-old fossil collector from the coast. It's another to say no to an 11-year-old boy from the Portland metropolitan area," DiTorrice said.

Likewise, the pear lobby recruited princesses from Hood River's Blossom Court to address lawmakers in 2005.

The Pear Bureau Northwest orchestrated a publicity campaign, serving fruit slices in the Capitol's lobby and giving away stuffed toy "Pear Buddies" to attract attention.

In contrast, the state soil contingent arrived in Salem with no gimmicks or earnest youngsters. They relied exclusively on testimony about the

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COMING WEDNESDAY

session character: The session went smoothly, characterized by a get-down-to-business attitude

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Soils recognized by government

vital role of soil in forestry, agriculture and ecology; nobody brought a soil display.

Soil scientists picked Jory from approximately 3,500 soil types in the Northwest, deeming it the most representative for Oregon.

"Any soil you pick is going to be objectionable to somebody," said Herb Huddleston, a retired Oregon State University professor and soil scientist who lobbied for Jory.

The soil is named after Jory Hill in Marion County, where it is found in abundance. The legislation, House Joint Resolution 48, was introduced by Rep. Greenlick on behalf of constituent Richard Page, who is related to the Jory family.

Page, a retired insurance executive, said he probably won't make another attempt at promoting a state soil. He noted some commentators were less-than-kind to Jory, calling the state soil "a dumb idea."

State representative Kevin Cameron, R-Salem, agreed to co-sponsor the resolution because the soil is in his district.

Mark Nelson, a prominent Salem lobbyist, picked the state soil resolution as one of two proposals for his "Turkey of the Session" award. The other recipient was a bill that allowed death certificates to be filled out in any color of ink.

Some critics complained that Jory just isn't fertile enough to represent Oregon. Backers of the state soil never asserted it was the preeminent soil for agriculture, although Christmas trees, hazelnuts, grass seed, and other crops can thrive in it.

But the volcanic soil has won acclaim for growing wine grapes -- and that proved to be the prospective state symbol's undoing. In wine industry circles, debate is raging over whether Jory or Willakenzie, a soil from marine origins, produces the best Pinot noir.

State Sen. Gary George, R-Newberg, asserted at the legislation's only hearing that making Jory an official symbol might "devalue grapes grown on other soils." Representatives of the wine industry made similar complaints at the March hearing.

Scott Burns, a geology professor and past president of the Oregon Society of Soil Scientists, said he knew the state soil was doomed when Sen. George raised the issue of Jory versus Willakenzie.

"He missed the whole point," Burns said. No one wanted to suggest that Jory soil was somehow better than other soils, he said.

Rep. Greenlick said the concerns about giving some vineyards an unfair advantage by making Jory a state symbol seem off-base. The representative doesn't view the state soil as a trivial issue and he's willing to try again next session.

mrose@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6657

In one sense, Jory already is Oregon's official soil.

All 50 states, as well as Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, have a state soil recognized by a U.S. Department of Agriculture program. That initiative to raise awareness about soil conservation has been around for decades.

About 20 states have taken the next step and made soil an official state symbol.

Oregon is not among them -- at least for now.