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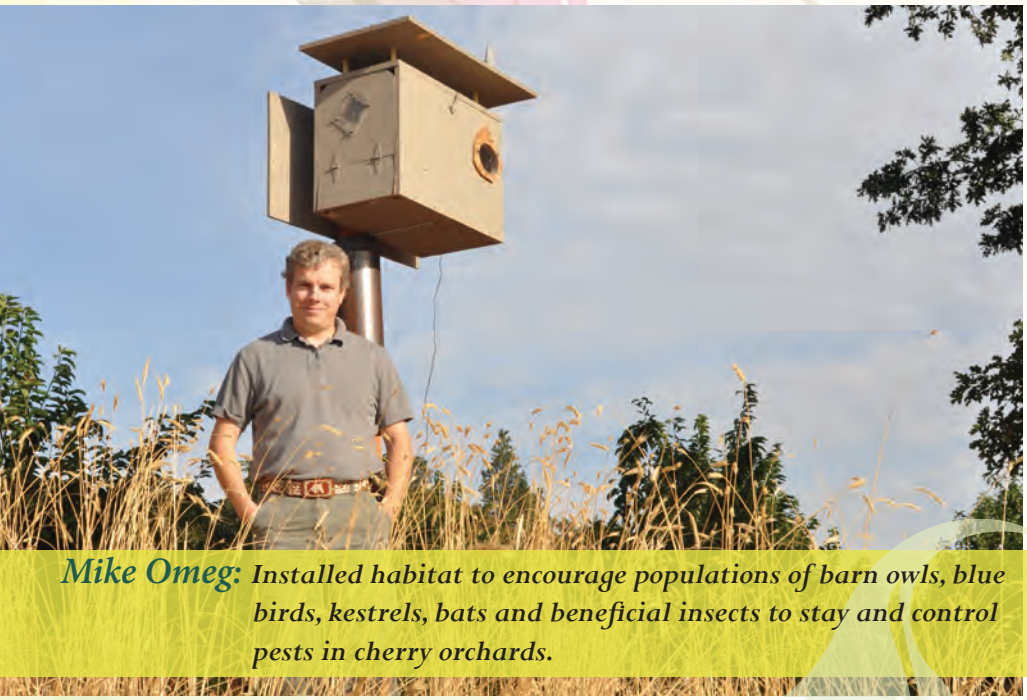
NRCS OREGON
Natural Resources Conservation Service

OREGON Conservation showcase



Mike Omeg: *Installed habitat to encourage populations of barn owls, blue birds, kestrels, bats and beneficial insects to stay and control pests in cherry orchards.*

*Mike Omeg **builds** on his family's **legacy** of conservation.*

The Dalles, Ore. —

Mike Omeg climbs up the tall ladder and quietly peers in the top of an owl box. The fifth generation farmer is trying to encourage barn owls to take up residence in the 50 nesting boxes Mike has built and installed around his cherry orchards. The owls are a low impact method to manage rodent damage: one family of barn owls is likely to consume 3,000 gophers each year.

Since Mike took over the farm from his retired parents, Mel and Linda Omeg, he has added several innovative conservation practices, including barn owl boxes. The Omeg family, who are well-known in the cherry industry here, have a long legacy of conservation, so Mike comes by his inclination naturally. "Our family has always worked hard to be the best stewards of our land that we can," says Mike.

According to Dusty Eddy, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist, the Omegs have been great partners and enthusiastic promoters of conservation for NRCS. Mel Omeg serves as the Chairman of Wasco Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), and volunteers much of his time to promote the SWCD activities. "Mike is a true innovator for our area. He has worked with NRCS and the SWCD to plan and sponsor workshops and tours on topics ranging from beneficial organisms to orchard spray technologies to automated climate and irrigation monitoring," says Dusty.

For three generations, the Omeg family has followed the technical advice of USDA-NRCS in order to integrate sound conservation practices on their land. When Mike's grandfather was a young man, he worked with the NRCS to preserve the topsoil resources. When Mike's dad farmed, he focused on reducing the toxicity

of pesticides used on the farm–moving away from broad spectrum products and selecting less toxic or pest-specific pesticides that are safer for workers and beneficial insects. "And now my focus is maintaining these practices of conserving topsoil and selective use of pesticides, and adding programs to reduce water use and improve habitats in our orchards," explains Mike.

"In the last five years, we have transitioned over to micro-irrigation or drip systems to water all our orchards," says Mike. The new practice has led to a very large savings in irrigation water. In addition, they use an irrigation consultant and remote sensing technology to monitor our irrigation levels "so we only water when we need to," Mike adds. The irrigation improvements were partly funded through cost-share with NRCS's Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP).

> *"It is Important to think about how much an owl Works for you."*
>
> — ***Mike Omeg***

Another important conservation practice is the control of gophers and voles. "In the past we've had to put out traps or rodenticide poisons," explains Mike. "Now I have started to put up owl boxes." The boxes, which are about the size of an apple box, encourage owls to move into the orchards and set up housekeeping. Some 50 boxes are up; 20 are already occupied. "It's important to think about how much an owl works for you, says Mike. "Owls hunt rodents for you 365 days a year and we need that type of ally in our system helping us out."

The barn owl is a raptor, a nocturnal bird of prey. Eagles, falcons and hawks are also raptors, but they are active during the day. Barn owls like to live in barns; that's how they got their name. They've easily adapted to man-made structures like attics, silos, steeples, and in this case, nesting boxes. Barn owls are about the size of a small cat, but only weigh a pound. Their long wings have soft fringe-edged feathers that don't "swoosh" as they move. This slow, silent flight means curtains for an unsuspecting rodent.

Water-Saving Irrigation: ***Omeg's drip and micro irrigation systems were made possible in part by funds supplied through the NRCS Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP).***

Busy Bees: *Bees and other beneficial insects thrive in insectaries on the scabs of Omeg's property.*

Other types of nesting boxes dot the hillsides of Omeg Orchards as well. Some are for bluebirds, which are helpful in controlling insect pests, and some are for kestrels—or sparrow hawks—the smallest members of the falcon family. A resident population of kestrels can keep a cap on cherry-eating birds such as starlings and rodents that may damage cherry crops if gone unchecked. Songbirds are usually safe from the kestrels, as they fly too quickly to be caught.

A tall, slim black box completes the nesting community—this one is for bats. Bats are the primary predators of night-flying insects. According to Oregon State University Extension Service, bats have lost much of their natural habitat and the man-made "mini bat caves" are an enticing reason for bats to hang around the farm and swoop up their favorite fare: insects. Some species of bats can capture several hundred insects an hour, including insect species that can devastate valuable plants and crops, making them a valuable ally for cherry growers.

Along the roadsides and on scabs—small unfarmable bits of land—at Omeg Orchards, a colorful tapestry of flowers is abuzz with activity. Blanket flower, verbena, mint, lavender, sunflowers and cone flowers are interspersed with wild roses and currant shrubs to host a happy hum of insects. "I am developing habitat for beneficial insects, including predatory insects like ladybird beetles and lacewings, and beneficial pollinators like bees," explains Mike.

Mike hires 800 hives of honey bees to work the orchards during blossom time but they are removed after the last cherry petal drops. "These little flower gardens, or insectaries, provide food to our insect allies when the cherries aren't in bloom," says Mike. This constant source of nourishment encourages beneficial insects—including wild bees—to build up their populations and in turn, pollinate the crops or control insect pests.

Mulching is another conservation method seen in Omeg Family Orchards. Recently, Mike and his team have started to install ground cover, in the form of straw mulch, in the tree rows. "This practice has a number of benefits: it reduces the amount of irrigation water we use, it contributes to the organic matter in the soil and it improves soil tilth." To illustrate the effectiveness of the technique, Mike pulls aside the straw mulch to reveal soil that is moist and friable compared to dry hardpan outside the root zone.

From top soil protection and safer pesticide use, to efficient irrigation and development of habitats, Mike Omeg is continuing a legacy of conservation that is sure to be appreciated and embraced by the next generation cherry farmer on the Omeg place who is, at two months of age, hanging out with dad in the family's organic vegetable garden.

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