

Idaho, Oregon onion growers relieved by FDA's final produce rule

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Idaho and Oregon onion growers say they can live with the water quality provisions included in the FDA's final produce safety rule, which was released Nov. 13.

Two years ago, they were worried the proposed water quality provisions in FDA's originally proposed produce rule could put them out of business. But industry officials said the FDA heard their concerns and re-wrote the rule in a way that onion growers are OK with.

To go from a rule that would have seriously impacted the economics of the onion industry "to a rule that's livable for us and allows us to stay in business is a huge victory," said Kay Riley, chairman of the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee.

When FDA first proposed its produce safety rule in 2013, it included water quality standards limiting how much generic E. coli bacteria could be present in agricultural water.

If the water didn't meet those standards, farmers had to immediately stop using it. Virtually none of the surface water used by onion growers in Eastern Oregon and Southwestern Idaho meets those standards.

The water quality standards still exist in the final



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Yellow onions grown in the Treasure Valley area of Idaho and Oregon are sorted at the JC Watson Co. packing facility in Parma, Idaho, Sept. 15. Growers say they can live with the water quality provisions included in the FDA's final produce safety rule, which was released Nov. 13.

rule.

But FDA altered them to allow growers to meet the standards, even if their water exceeds the minimum bacteria levels, if they can show through scientific evidence that bacteria dies off at a certain rate from the last day of irrigation until harvest.

The bulb onions grown

in the region are left in the field to dry for a few weeks following harvest. Field trials by Oregon State University researchers have shown these onions will meet the so-called die-off provisions.

"The thing that's great about it is they actually listened to us," Riley said. "I would deem it a tremendous

victory compared to what it could have been."

But the final rule still requires farmers to test their water annually, even if they meet the die-off provisions. Onion growers say the testing will be costly and time-consuming and they hope to be able to skip them.

"They are still going to require testing and that's going to be the hardest thing to deal with," said Stuart Reitz, an OSU cropping systems extension agent in Ontario. "The final rule is not ideal but it's not that bad. It's one onion growers can live with."

Reitz said the industry is working with FDA to see if it's possible an entity such as an irrigation district could conduct water quality tests in canals and have the results apply to a large group of farmers.

"That would get each individual farm out from having to do the testing themselves," he said. "We really need to get some more details from FDA on what type of format that would potentially be."

According to the FDA rule, farmers may use data collected by a third party, such as an irrigation district, but the "testing data may only be shared if there is no reasonably identifiable source of likely microbiological contamination between the sampling sites and the farms involved."

FDA to explain food safety rule Dec. 1 in Portland

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

A high-level FDA official, along with several of the agency's food safety experts, will explain the FDA's new produce rule Dec. 1 during a meeting in Portland.

The meeting is being organized by the Idaho, Oregon and Washington agriculture departments and is meant to shed some light on the agency's produce rule as well as its preventive controls for human food rule.

Ag department officials said they expect a lot of questions about the produce safety rule, which was released Nov. 13 and affects any farmer who grows fruits or vegetables that can be eaten raw.

Michael Taylor, FDA's deputy commissioner for foods and veterinary medicine, will attend the meeting, which is expected to attract a sizable number of farmers, food processors and farm group representatives.

"It's one of those rules that is of concern to anyone involved in agriculture and we are anticipating there will be a good turnout," said Washington State Department of Agriculture Communications Director Hector Castro.

Questions about the produce rule will likely focus on its water quality testing provisions, said Claudia Coles, policy adviser of the WSDA's food safety division.

"The water testing is ... the big issue," she said. "There are going to be questions about (that)."

The meeting will be held at the Portland Airport Sheraton Hotel and registration is not required.

An overview of the produce safety rule will take place from 9-11:30 a.m.

and an overview of the preventive controls for human food rule will be from 1-2:45 p.m. An additional question-and-answer period will follow.

Representatives of the Idaho-Oregon onion industry will attend the meeting and their main questions will center on the agricultural water testing required by the produce rule, said Grant Kitamura, chairman of the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee's promotion committee.

"The water testing is our main concern," he said. "We'll be looking for clarification on a few things at the meeting."

The bulb onions grown in Southwestern Idaho and Eastern Oregon are left in the field to cure and Oregon State University field trials have shown bacteria dies off the onions rapidly during the curing process.

OSU researchers in Ontario pumped irrigation water filled with mega amounts of bacteria onto onion fields but no bacteria was detected on the onions after curing.

Onion growers still hope to be exempted from the water testing requirements and will be looking for some guidance from FDA on that issue, Kitamura said.

"How necessary is water testing if you've proven that curing eliminates any bacteria?" he said. "It's going to be very cumbersome and expensive (and) we're trying not to have to do the water testing."

Coles said she also expects questions about provisions in the rules that require foreign food imports to meet the same food safety requirements.

People are asking, "Are you truly going to apply the rule to the foreign food coming into this country?" she said.

Flowering rush expands while regulations delay removal

Irrigation canal-clogging weed spreads to new sites along Columbia river

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Flowering rush, an aquatic weed that clogs irrigation canals, has spread to multiple new sites near McNary Dam along the Columbia River since its discovery in the area last year.

Meanwhile, the federal government must again clear environmental regulatory hurdles before removing new patches of flowering rush found growing below the dam, which is under the jurisdiction of a different regional office of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"Because we're part of the federal government, we have to follow federal laws and regulations," said Diana Fredlund, spokesperson for the Army Corps' Portland District.

Flowering rush was first found growing on the Oregon side of the Columbia River in August 2014, with surveys eventually locating 15 sites near McNary Dam.

That portion of the river is governed by the Walla Walla District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which had to obtain approval under the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Archeological Resources Protection Act to remove the weed with diver-assisted suction hoses.

"This should be straightforward. We're just going in and by hand removing some small sites," said Tim Butler,



Diver Andrew Hannes, with the Army Corps of Engineers out of Portland, gestures while searching for flowering rush on the bottom of the Columbia River near Umatilla in August 2015.

E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

Oregon Department of Agriculture's noxious weed program manager.

By the time the agency cleared those hurdles and scheduled a dive team to yank the flowering rush patches in August 2015, the weed had expanded to 45 total sites in the area.

While divers were able to treat 39 of those sites, six of them were growing on the Columbia River below McNary Dam, which means they come under the purview of the Army Corps' Portland District, said Mark Porter, an integrated weed management coordinator for ODA.

For that reason, the process of obtaining clearance under NEPA, ESA and ARPA must now be repeated by the agency's Portland office, which is unlikely to occur in time for the patches to be removed before next year, he said.

The agency expects that the regulatory processes will be completed over winter, when the plants disappear below the water line, so they can be covered with mats or removed when they re-emerge next spring, said Fredlund.

"We do want it to keep it from becoming a bigger problem," she said.

The Army Corps' Walla

District can continue removing the weed without re-clearing regulatory barriers, and its experience is expected to speed up the Portland District's compliance with those statutes, said Damian Walter, wildlife biologist for the agency.

Apart from sites on the Columbia River, there's a large population of flowering rush upriver on the Yakima River in Washington, which state regulators are attempting to control, he said.

"There is a constant source currently in the system," Walter said. "We've got to address the source of it."

As part of long-term plans to battle flowering rush, Washington State University is studying predatory beetles in Central Europe that feed on the weed's roots in that region, limiting its spread.

The weed poses a serious threat if it's able to enter irrigation systems along the Columbia River or its tributaries, said Porter. Flowering rush grows so thickly that it greatly slows the movement of water and changes aquatic ecosystems.

"This plant seems to be a very aggressive aquatic invader. This isn't just another weed," he said. "It has the big potential to do some harm."

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