

Washington



Courtesy of Tim Murray/Washington State University

Snow mold in a wheat field. Washington State University researchers say wheat fields reach a critical point for the development of the disease at 100 days of snow cover, and some fields may reach that point this year.

Snow mold concerns loom as snow cover lingers

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Snow mold is a looming concern for some wheat farmers in Central and Eastern Washington.

“We’re (estimating) right now we’re at about 75 days of snow cover,” said Tim Murray, Washington State University Extension plant pathologist, “In the world of snow mold, 100 days is kind of the magic number. When you hit 100 and if the soil was not frozen when the snow fell, that’s where we get concerned about increasing damage.”

Twenty-five more days of snow cover is possible, said Dale Whaley, Douglas County WSU Extension educator.

The mold spores are on the wheat under the snow, Whaley said.

“Actually, it’s a lot warmer underneath the snow cover,” he said. “You have the environment, the host and the disease. That’s when you have the disease triangle and you start to have the full-blown disease.”

Snow mold is primarily a concern north of U.S. Highway 2, and around the Water-ville Plateau, particularly in northern and higher-elevation areas, said Ryan Higginbotham, regional extension specialist, who runs WSU’s cereal variety testing program.

Most varieties grown in the area are resistant to snow mold, Higginbotham said. It’s usually one of the first questions a grower will ask when selecting which variety to plant.

“Most farmers, if they’ve had snow mold before, they remember, and they’re not real willing to plant something that’s susceptible,” he said.

At this point, farmers can only hope that the mold doesn’t develop, Whaley said. They should scout their field when the snow comes off, looking for gray snow mold or speckled snow mold, which has a pinkish hue, he said.

“We don’t expect huge losses from it, but the potential for damage is there, that’s for sure,” Murray said.

A variety selection tool, available on WSU’s small grains website, includes ratings for snow mold resistance, Higginbotham said.

The snow cover protects wheat plants from the cold, Whaley said.

“It’s a catch-22 — you want the snow cover, especially if you’re forecast for subzero temperatures and any wind,” he said. “But then you don’t want the snow cover to lay around forever, because then snow mold can be an issue. There’s never a happy medium as a small grains producer.”

Farmers, DNR support longer lease termination notices

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Washington wheat farmers and the state Department of Natural Resources both support a Senate bill that would increase the notice the agency must give farmers before terminating a lease on state land.

Farmers and the department testified Jan. 19 in favor of Senate Bill 5051 before the state Senate Agriculture, Water, Trade and Economic Development Committee.

In the case of a “non-default termination,” the department is authorized to terminate a lease for “higher and better use, land exchange or sale.”

The bill would require DNR to give written notice to farmers 180 days before termination of the lease, and give to farmers written documentation

of its plan for the land.

The bill is in response to a situation last summer, when DNR terminated the leases of several Benton County farmers. The leases were to expire in 2020.

DNR intends to convert the roughly 4,000 acres of dryland wheat production into irrigated land for row crops and orchards using its surface water right from the Columbia River, said Darin Cramer, manager of the department’s sales and leasing division.

The department terminated the leases for four or five dryland farmers, Cramer said.

“At first, there was no compensation,” said Michelle Hennings, executive director of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers. “(DNR) just said, ‘Oh, no, you have to do this and you get nothing.’”

Some of the farmers had already seeded the land, Hennings said.

“Communication was handled poorly with those tenants,” Cramer said. “We didn’t do as good a job as we should have. We didn’t notify them as early as we should have. We had some miscommunication internally. One hand thought it happened, but it actually didn’t. When we went to meet with them, as you might imagine, those folks were surprised and not pleased.”

DNR came to terms with all farmers, Cramer said.

“We did arrive at what we consider fair compensation,” he said. “It’s my understanding some of those folks didn’t think the compensation was fair, but they did accept the compensation and cash the check.”

Hennings said the offer covered costs, but the farmers were offered the option of accepting it or taking it to court. The growers did not want to take on the risk of losing the lawsuit and having to pay DNR’s attorney fees as well as their own, she said.

The bill is consistent with practices the department has implemented in recent months, Cramer said. The department has begun moving toward longer notification periods, he said.

Farmers Chad Smith and Nicole Berg and lobbyist Diana Carlen testified in favor of the bill, according to WAWG.

Hennings said wheat growers have asked for advance notice of a crop year instead of 180 days. Cramer said that would be fine with DNR.

Puget Sound farm group shifts approach to saving crop land

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

SNOHOMISH COUNTY, Wash. — The Washington State Conservation Commission toured the fast-growing north Puget Sound area last week, and farmer Dan Bartelheimer had something to tell it.

“This agricultural land needs to be protected and kept intact,” said Bartelheimer, president of the Snohomish County Farm Bureau.

The simple message won’t be easy to carry out. The county’s agricultural sector has been losing ground to private development and government projects. The first stop on the commission’s tour was a former dairy that will become a city park.

Bartelheimer’s farm was the second stop. His family has been farming in the county for more than a century. Times have changed. “It seem like everybody’s sitting on a hill and looking down and expressing their opinion, ‘Hey, here’s how they should do it.’ And years ago, we didn’t have that,” he said.

So, Bartelheimer said, farmers must change, too. “The Farm Bureau has al-



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Snohomish County Farm Bureau President Dan Bartelheimer, right, gestures while talking about preserving farmland during a Washington State Conservation Commission tour at his farm Jan. 18. Snohomish County Conservation District Manager Monte Marti looks on.

ways been great for property rights,” he said in a post-tour interview. “It’s not just property rights. It’s responsible stewardship. We have to look at things a little differently if we’re going to preserve agriculture in the community.”

The county Farm Bureau has tried in vain to claim that converting publicly owned farmland into fish habitat violates the state’s Growth Management Act. Last summer, farmers shifted tactics. They hosted a dinner for govern-

ment officials, environmentalists and tribal leaders.

“It was a very powerful dinner,” organic farmer Tristan Klesick said. “When you break bread, you can’t demonize the person in front of you.”

Snohomish County Conservation District Manager Monte Marti said he’ll remember the evening forever.

“This has not been easy for Dan (Bartelheimer) to come to the table,” Marti said. “There are probably Farm Bureau

members who think he’s nuts for even sitting at the table.

“He’s not backing down on his beliefs. He still has very strong principles,” Marti said. “At least he’s going to get his day in court. He’s being heard.”

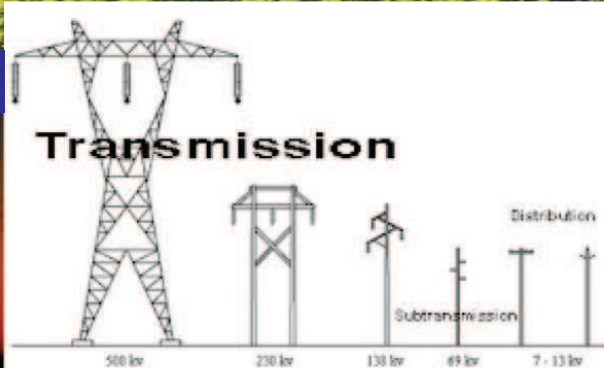
The county has an array of land preservation initiatives. Bartelheimer said the Farm Bureau has been reluctant to engage because of the belief that projects valued fish restoration over farmland preservation.

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