

Sugar growers won't support Mexico trade amendment

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — American sugar grower organizations aren't satisfied with the latest proposal to resolve their ongoing concerns about the illegal dumping of subsidized Mexican sugar in the U.S.

On June 6, USDA and the U.S. Department of Commerce announced a proposal to amend a December 2014 agreement between the U.S. and Mexico that growers say failed to restore balance to the U.S. sugar market.

Jack Roney, director of economics and policy analysis with the American Sugar Alliance, said the proposed amendment represents a "big improvement but doesn't quite get there."

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said in a press release the agreement would avert potential retaliation by Mexico and set a good tone for the upcoming renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

"I maintain that if the rules



Sean Ellis/Capital Press File

A sugar beet field near Nampa, Idaho. Organizations representing U.S. sugar growers say they can't support a recent proposal to improve an agreement regarding sugar dumping by Mexico.

are fair and the playing field is level, American agricultural products will succeed, thrive and lead the way," Perdue said.

Corn Refiners Association President John Bode lauded the proposal as a means of strengthening the original agreement without threatening the \$500 million in U.S. corn sweetener exports to Mexico.

But sugar producers believe the amendment, as currently drafted, would open up a new "loophole." Roney explained Mexico has the right to supply 100 percent of any unmet needs of the U.S. sugar market, and the amendment would strip USDA of its ability to specify whether those surplus sugar shipments should be unrefined or processed.

Roney said the alliance is working with the U.S. government on further modifications to close the loophole, with a deadline of June 30 for the updated agreement to be finalized.

Roney said Mexican sugar exports into the U.S. doubled in 2013 to 2 million tons, contributing to a U.S. sugar price collapse. He estimates price declines cost U.S. sugar growers \$2 billion during 2013 and 2014 combined. In lieu of imposing tariffs, the governments of Mexico and the U.S. agreed in 2014 to set minimum prices for Mexican sugar and to limit the refined share of Mexican sugar exports.

But Roney said the agreement allowed Mexico to ship the U.S. too much refined sugar and not enough raw cane to supply U.S. sugar refineries. He estimates U.S. growers have lost another \$2 billion since the agreement was signed. Without changes to the original agreement, Roney fears further price decreases could soon lead U.S. growers to default on federal loans.

The proposed amendment would increase minimum prices of Mexican sugar from 22.25 cents per pound to 23 cents for unrefined sugar and from 26 cents per pound to 28 cents for refined sugar. Most importantly, Roney believes, the amendment would reduce the percentage of refined sugar Mexico can export to the U.S. from 53 percent to 30 percent, while revising the standard for raw sugar from a maximum purity of 99.5 percent to 99.2 percent.

"That was a problem we noted with the original suspension agreements and later took a chance on and really wish we hadn't," Roney said.

The Sweetener Users Association, which represents big U.S. sugar buyers, issued a statement predicting the amendment would hurt consumers by increasing sugar prices.

"The sugar lobby is simply trying to extract additional concessions, despite having gotten what it asked for," the association said in its press release.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Seed peas are planted near Nampa, Idaho, on March 28. Many crops in the Treasure Valley of Idaho and Oregon were planted several weeks late this year and yields could be reduced as a result. But most farmers expect those crops to be OK if there is a normal summer this year.

Delayed planting in Treasure Valley could reduce crop yields

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

NAMPA, Idaho — Record winter snowfall followed by a steady string of spring rainstorms delayed by several weeks the planting of many crops in the Treasure Valley that straddles the Idaho-Oregon border.

It's also pushed field work back significantly.

"Everything is behind," said Meridian, Idaho, farmer Richard Durrant. "A lot of spraying, fertilization and other things that still need to be done hasn't happened yet."

Many farmers told Capital Press they are not overly concerned by the late start and expect their crops to turn out OK with a normal summer.

But they also say the late start means a repeat of last year's record yields for many crops is unlikely.

"Without a doubt, it will make a little difference in yields," said Eastern Oregon farmer Craig Froerer.

While yields for sugar beets grown in Idaho and Malheur County, Ore., set a record in 2016, he said, "I don't think you can expect that this year with how late in the game we are."

Many farmers in the area were late getting in their fields because record or near-record amounts of snowfall left fields saturated when it melted. That was exacerbated by persistent spring rainstorms that have only recently broken.

During the past 10 days the Treasure Valley has had much warmer and drier weather.

Many crops started slowly but are responding to the more favorable growing conditions, said Paul Skeen, president of the Malheur County Onion Growers Association.

Skeen planted the majority of his onions two to three weeks later than usual.

"But with this hot weather we've had (recently), they are really starting to jump," he said. "Sugar beets are a little bit behind but they're also really coming on."

Skeen agrees the late start will have an impact on yields.

"We have a good crop coming but yields, in my opinion, are going to be below average because of the lateness," he said.

According to Stuart Reitz, an Oregon State University Extension cropping systems agent in Malheur County, as of June 1 the area had 16 fewer heat degree days than last year and 12 fewer than in 2015. Heat degree days are calculated by subtracting a reference temperature, which varies by crop, from the daily mean temperature. The higher the mean temperature, the more heat degree days are recorded.

Reitz agreed that yields will depend on how the summer plays out.

"If we get some good, warm but not too hot conditions, things should finish off OK," he said. "But if it stays cool and rainy, some of those late-planted crops may not turn out too well."

Across Idaho and Eastern Oregon, sugar beets were on average planted two weeks later than during recent years, said Clark Alder, an area agronomist for grower-owned Amalgamated Sugar Co.

Be wary of rattlesnake encounters, WSU says

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Watch your step.

That's the advice university researchers are offering to farmers and ranchers this year as rattlesnakes become more active in Eastern Washington.

Washington State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital recently treated a dog and a horse that had been bitten by rattlesnakes. According to the university, anecdotal reports indicate "there seems to be a lot of snakes out this year, perhaps more than in most years."

Charlie Powell, spokesman for the College of Veterinary Medicine, told the Capital Press a late spring may have allowed rattlesnakes to leave their den later, making for a higher concentration of snakes around areas where they might have otherwise already dispersed.

Such conditions shorten the overall season in which snakes can feed and breed before the fall and winter return, Powell said in a WSU news report. In warm weather, snakes are likely to be more active.

The Western rattlesnake is common to much of Eastern Washington, according to WSU. They are usually spotted near dens, which are generally in rock crevices exposed to sunshine. They most often are seen at night and dusk during the spring and fall when moving to and from hibernation sites.



Courtesy Bill Bouton via Wikipedia Commons

A Western rattlesnake (*Crotalus oreganus*) is common in much of Eastern Washington, according to WSU. They may be more prevalent this year, so awareness and avoidance are recommended.

No long-term study of rattlesnake populations exists, so predicting population sizes is not feasible, said Kenneth Kardong, a professor emeritus at WSU's School of Biological Sciences who studies reptiles.

He recommends farmers be careful and watch their step.

Powell says the best thing to do for any average person, including farmers or ranchers, is to leave the rattlesnake alone. Rattlesnakes help control rodents and small vermin that can create problems in fields, Powell said.

Most farmers' fields are intensively worked, Powell said.

"In order to have venomous reptiles around, you've

got to have small mammals around for them to eat," he said. "But in the middle of a plowed field, it's unlikely to run into those types of things."

However, rattlesnakes can bite livestock on rangeland. Most ranchers aren't even aware when it happens, Powell said, because the bite area will swell and be uncomfortable for two to three days, but then the symptoms will disappear.

"This is not like the situation with Eastern large diamondback rattlesnakes that are much more venomous or snakes that have different types of venom," Powell said. "Our Western rattlesnakes (cause) relatively less

At a glance

Western rattlesnake

Binomial name: *Crotalus viridis* (nine subspecies in North America)

Appearance: Broad, triangular head, diamond-shaped pattern along the back with a rattle on the tip of the tail. Overall color patterns differ with habitat, ranging from olive to brown to gray. Mature rattlesnakes measure from 24 to 60 inches in length.

Range: British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan south through western U.S. states, and into Baja California and Northern Mexico.

Habitat: Arid plains, desert margins, fertile valleys, prairie grasslands, chaparral-covered foothills, rocky ridges, mountain meadows and forests.

Prey: Primarily rodents

Venom: Contains hemotoxic elements which damage tissues and affect the circulatory system.

Sources: Washington Dept. of Fish and Wildlife; University of Oregon; Idaho Museum of Natural History

Courtesy National Park Service



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

harm than other types of rattlesnakes."

Kardong recommends keeping an eye on the bitten animal.

"Most farm animals — pigs, cattle — can ride out a bite," he said. "If not, get it to the vet. Horses are a special situation as they cannot breathe through their mouths. Hence, if bitten in the snout and it swells up, get the vet."

Half of all rattlesnake bites on large animals or people are "dry" bites, "meaning the snake is not wasting its venom on you," Powell said.

"It's basically telling you, 'Leave me alone,'" he said. "You're too big for that snake to eat, and it takes time and energy to produce that ven-

om, so why waste something that's essential for you to eat on something that's too big for you to eat?"

If a farmer or companion animal is bitten, Powell advises immediate medical care.

"With human beings, don't do any of the old cut-and-suck types of things, don't apply ice to the wound," he said. "Simply elevate the wound above your heart if you can, get yourself to a hospital and let them help you determine how to best treat that wound."

"Don't screw around by trying to treat in the field," Kardong echoed. "(It is) usually useless and wastes valuable time."

Producers encouraged to meet with China trade mission in Portland

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

The largest trade mission to visit Oregon — a 25-member team from China — will stop in Portland June 21-22 to check out specialty food, snack products and wine, craft beer and hard cider.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture is hosting the group, which will stop on their way back from the annual Summer Fancy Food Show in New York City. It is the Chinese group's only other stop in the U.S., and the ag department encourages specialty food and beverage producers

to make themselves available. Vendors would typically set up a booth, offer samples and provide information. Interpreters are available.

The Chinese buyers are especially interested in healthy snacks such as dried fruit and nuts, said Theresa Yoshioka, an ODA trade development manager.

Healthy snacks are served to guests and are "very, very popular in China," Yoshioka said.

The country's expanding middle class provides a market opportunity for Oregon producers, and the state's reputation for high-quality food and

drink products is an advantage, she said.

Chinese consumers in some regions are developing a taste for fine wine, and Yoshioka said she's been to craft beer pubs in Beijing. With both parents in a household increasingly working and having less time to prepare meals, Chinese families also have a need for convenience foods, Yoshioka said.

The trade mission team is made up of people with the authority to buy products, she said. Oregon producers interested in selling to China may have to scale up production, however, and that's a jump for

some, she said.

Oregon has innovative snack producers, for example, who are making premium products, but are still quite small, Yoshioka said.

"You need to be big enough to have an established co-packer (an existing manufacturing company that may produce items under private label) or have your own facility," she said. "You need to be at that level to ship to China."

But she encouraged even small producers to visit with trade mission groups to learn what they're looking for. "It's a good market testing opportunity and a chance to get in

front of a buyer," Yoshioka said.

Vendors interested in the Portland event should contact Yelena Nowak, also a department trade official, at ynowak@oda.state.or.us.

Another Chinese trade mission, this time an all-woman team involved in the seafood industry, will visit Astoria and Newport on the Oregon Coast June 26-30.

Buyers from South Korea and Mexico will visit in July; Taiwan teams arrive in August and September; and two more Chinese trade groups will visit in August and October, according to ODA.

Eastern Oregon field day highlights research for wheat growers

By GEORGE PLAVERN
EO Media Group

PENDLETON, Ore. — Gusty winds made for a chilly Tuesday morning at the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center north of Pendleton, where scientists with Oregon State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture hosted their annual field day for local wheat growers.

The station, on Tubbs Ranch Road, is home to both OSU and the USDA Agricultural Research Service. Field day provides an annual update of ongoing research projects to

help farmers improve the quality of their crop and the bottom line of their business.

Participants rode in buses from one wavy wheat field to the next, where project leaders discussed their latest findings on experiments to battle weeds, plant diseases and soil degradation. Representatives of the National Association of Wheat Growers were also on hand to gather feedback on priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill.

Christina Hagerty, plant pathologist at the station, said this year was a perfect storm for stripe rust across the region, given early seeding of winter

wheat followed by a cool, wet spring. Stripe rust is capable of cutting wheat yields by more than half if it goes untreated.

Hagerty passed around samples to show how to identify diseases such as stripe rust, eyespot and crown rot. While OSU has done a good job of developing disease-resistant wheat varieties, Hagerty said options are still lacking for soil-borne mosaic virus, which has been another major focus of her program.

"Our options for genetic resistance are pretty limited," she said.

Bob Zemetra, a wheat

breeder for OSU in Corvallis, said he began screening for soil-borne mosaic virus in 2008. The disease is especially on the rise around the Walla Walla Valley, and can cause severe stunting in plants.

"One of my goals is to release varieties that can fit in across the state, and in these micro-climates," Zemetra said.

Other issues raised during field day included soil stratification, where the nutrient and pH levels are uneven in the soil profile. Don Wysocki, a soil scientist with OSU Extension, said that problem is "like

a freight train coming down the line" for farmers.

One possible soil amendment is biochar, a charcoal-like substance made by roasting biomass such as woody debris at high temperatures and low oxygen. Biochar has already been proven to instantly increase organic matter and soil pH in tests conducted at the research station.

Stephen Machado, agronomist for OSU, reviewed his data from early experiments and said he is now looking into how long the residual effects of biochar may last.