Official: Nursery imports may pose pest threat

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Wyatt Williams, an invasive species specialist with the Oregon Department of Forestry, said afterward he felt like he was entering the lion's den. He was about to tell members of the Oregon Association of Nurseries, the most valuable sector of state agriculture, about a problem that would "send ripples through your industry and my field, forest health."

Specifically, the importation of live plants into Oregon and the U.S. is a primary pathway for invasive insects and pathogens, some of which could cause severe damage to forests in particular.

Williams, invited to speak during the Northwest Agricultural Show in Portland, was hired in 2012 as the state forestry department's first invasive species specialist. He said there was a 500 percent increase in live plant imports to the U.S. from 1967 to 2009, and about 4 billion plants arrive in the country each year. Federal monitoring is done at 18 stations with only 63 full-time inspectors, he said, and standard inspections may miss an estimated 72 percent of pests.

Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Wyatt Williams has bad news for Oregon's nursery industry: 70 percent of invasive insects and pathogens arrive by way of imported live plants.

"We're missing stuff at the ports of entry," Williams said. "Something's broken there."

By backtracking invasives and comparing shipping records, experts deduced that 69 percent of invasive insects and diseases arrived with live plants, he said.

Oregon's nursery industry officials say they're well aware of the problem. The Oregon Association of Nurseries endorses a systems management approach detailed in a 106-page publication, "Safe Production and Procurement Manual." The manual, available online at http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.oan.org/resource/resmgr/imported/pdf/SafeProduction.pdf, lays out best practices for greenhouses and nurseries to detect pests and diseases and respond quickly if they appear.

Regarding plant imports, the manual recommends checking to see if the material is already available in the U.S. If so, producers can save time and money while reducing risk.

If it must be imported, the handbook recommends growers find an officially accredited nursery in the exporting country and have the material grown out for at least one year or one growing season. It also should be inspected, tested and evaluated in the source country before shipment, or evaluated at an accredited facility in the U.S. prior to commercial increase, according to the manual.

Jeff Stone, OAN executive director, said in an email that the manual is an industry standard and has been used as a model elsewhere. It also helped shape USDA policy governing interstate shipment of plant material.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture also collaborates with the industry to keep pests and diseases out of Oregon, said Helmuth Rogg, the department's Plant Program director.

"We are all in the same boat," Rogg said in a prepared statement. "We want to protect our industry, and our state, for that matter, from dangerous plant pests that could be associated with live plant material coming into Oregon."

The department has regulations in place and uses quarantines to keep pests out of the state, he said. The department also sets thousands of traps to monitor for pests, he said.

Williams, with the state forestry department, said cross-department and industry collaboration is key to keeping invasive insects and diseases under control.

The biggest threat on the horizon is the emerald ash borer, which hasn't made it to Oregon yet but has killed an estimated 100 million trees in 24 states since it was detected in 2002, Williams said.

Oregon ash grows in wetlands that provide habitat for "all kinds of animals," he said. An infestation that wiped out Oregon ash could pose any number of problems, he said. The city of Denver, where ash make up 15 percent of the city trees, estimated it would cost $1 billion to remove and replace every ash, Williams said. Portland has an estimated 72,000 ash trees in public places, he added. Williams said he's placed traps in Oregon ash groves and monitors them for presence of the emerald ash borer.

Other diseases and bugs of concern include gypsy moth, the azalea lace bug, sudden oak death and thousand cankers disease, William said.

NRCS gives farmers an option during drought

By LACEY JARRELL
For the Capital Press

Instead of letting fields remain fallow, farmers can convert to dryland crops and produce forage in times of drought.

"It's better to do something with your ground — have it produce something — rather than nothing," said rancher Ken Willard, of Chiloquin, Ore.

With the help of a Natural Resources Conservation Service dryland conversion program, last fall Willard converted 200 acres of his ranch to rye and triticale, a semi-beardless rye-wheat cross.

The two cereal crops will ensure at least some of Willard's 500-acre ranch stays in operation during years he doesn't have any water.

NRCS District Conservationist David Ferguson said this particular competitive dryland grant program was designed specifically for Klamath County farmers facing water shortages, but similar Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds are available throughout the state.

"We've provided a program that lets farmers offset their production losses under a drought, and it helps them provide feed for animals by converting some of these drier, hard-to-irrigate pastures to a perennial mix that produces better, if not the same, than their irrigated crops," Ferguson said.

The perennial mix will be something domestic like crested wheat or intermediate type grasses, he added.

According to Willard, the alfalfa he grew in the past requires at least four feet of water — rye and triticale require only a fraction of that. But Willard will only get one cutting from the dryland crops — as opposed to alfalfa, which sometimes produces up to four cuttings.

Lacey Jarrell/For the Capital Press

Ken Willard inspects beardless triticale at his Chiloquin, Ore., ranch. The triticale was planted as part of a dryland conversion program meant to help farmers produce crops during water shortages.

Ferguson noted that without first prepping the soil with cover crops for a couple of years, establishing perennial grasses in old pasture sod can be challenging. He said the Klamath program helps farmers prepare soil for permanent native or domestic grass mixes by first planting cover crops, such as cereal rye, for at least two years.

"We're having better success seeding it heavy and giving it some time for the cover crops and triticale to produce the feed," Ferguson said.

Dryland cover crops also help stabilize the soil and prevent noxious weeds from taking hold, according to Willard.

"Taking pastures out into a cereal crop is a good thing because it gets rid of the weeds. We plant it so thick, it doesn't let the thistles survive. They can't compete against a cereal crop," Willard said.

Surface flow reduces power costs for growers

By CRAIG REED
For the Capital Press

MALIN, Ore. — As the power bill for his irrigation pumps steadily increased, David King began considering other options to water his hay fields.

He decided to return to flood irrigation, also known as surface flow in more updated terms.

King said the transition in irrigation methods began four years ago. The power contract that provided discounted electrical rates to farmers in the Klamath Basin project expired seven years ago.

"I'd spend $6 to $10 an acre for sprinkler irrigation before the power rate went up," King said. "Now it's up to $70 an acre."

King is the owner of King Farms, a 2,500-acre forage production operation. In the last four years, about 800 of those acres have been laser leveled, the sprinklers moved and the fields have been irrigated by a series of ditches, pipes and head gates. King said the cost of leveling ranges from $150 to $200 an acre, but the transition of those 800 acres has saved $50,000 annually in power payments.

"I can recover my leveling expense in three years easily by using no power to irrigate," the farmer said.

Other Klamath Basin farmers who work flat ground have also been making the change.

"The simplist, easiest, least cost way to irrigation is surface flow, but the system has to be designed properly and maintained properly," Steve Cheyne said. "Gravity is still free. From that standpoint, I'm not surprised to see people going back to flood irrigation."

Cheyne, a semi-retired farmer in the Klamath area, has expertise in irrigation management after evaluating several hundred irrigation systems in Southern Oregon and Northern California during his extension service career.

"In the right places, the right surface, the right person doing the irrigation, it can be the most efficient system in some of the fields we have here," Cheyne said of surface flow. "We need to rethink the old idea that surface irrigation is wasteful. It can be, but those were the old days. We don't have those days anymore."

When the Klamath Project was developed in the early 1900s by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to turn rangeland into farmland, flood irrigation was the method used to spread water over the ground. Sprinklers became more visible in the project in the mid-1960s, allowing hillside fields that weren't conducive to flood irrigation to be established and productive.

Environmentalists protest 'test case' logging project

BLM defends project as improving forest resilience

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Environmentalists want to stop an Oregon timber project they claim is a "test case" for clear-cutting trees on the verge of becoming "old growth" stands.

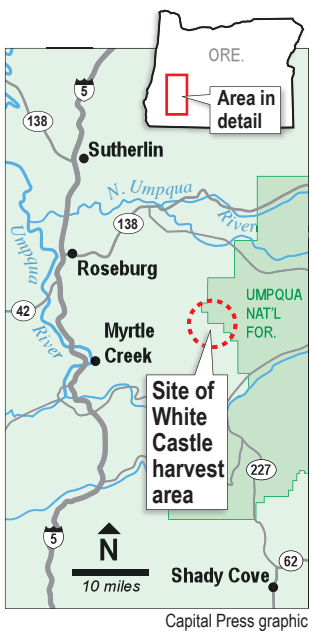
The U.S. Bureau of Land Management approved logging on 187 acres near Myrtle Creek, Ore., as part of the "White Castle" pilot project, which the nonprofits Oregon Wild and Cascadia Wildlands believe will set a precedent for harvesting mature forests.

The groups claim the White Castle project is a "politically driven" attempt to increase logging on BLM property in Western Oregon to buttress "struggling timber-based economies" that should be enjoined by a federal judge.

The BLM has departed from its risk-averse strategy of thinning younger trees to instead focus on harvesting mature stands about to develop old growth characteristics, they said in a lawsuit.

The experiment is meant to test whether the public will tolerate clear-cutting older trees under the guise of improving forest health, the plaintiffs claim.

"BLM pays a lot of lip service to ecological restoration. None of the allegations hold water," said Jennifer Schwartz, attorney for the environmentalists, during oral arguments in Portland on Jan. 22.



Capital Press graphic

The agency's stated goal of increasing the age diversity of forest stands isn't reasonable in light of the young trees on private lands that surround the project, she said.

Trees within project boundaries regenerated naturally around the turn of the 20th century after wildfires swept through the previously unlogged area, Schwartz said.

By failing to explain why it's necessary to log these older trees rather than thin younger stands, the BLM has violated its requirement to take a "hard look" at impacts and explore a "range of alternatives" under the National Environmental Policy Act, she said. "The BLM did not meet that burden here."

Brian Collins, attorney for the government, countered that the project was designed with the help of highly respected forestry professors — Norm Johnson of Oregon State University and Jerry Franklin of the University of Oregon — who have throughly studied how such logging will affect the forest.

"It is not experimental," Collins said.

Harvesting trees will return parts of the project area to "early seral" habitat that must be distinguished from the young stands of trees on private lands managed for maximum timber production, he said.

The logging project is meant to improve the forest's resiliency and support biodiversity rather than trying to recapture "historic conditions" that may or may not have existed in the area, Collins said.

The plaintiffs are conflating stand age with ecosystem complexity, he said.

Plans for the White Castle project call for harvested areas to remain open to sunlight for a longer period of time, permitting the growth of shrubs and "understory" plants that benefit species preyed upon by threatened spotted owls, he said.

This approach is much different than clear-cutting on private lands, where managers encourage quick reforestation and a "closed canopy" of trees that suppresses plant diversity, Collins said.

"You're using herbicides to keep that understory growth out," he said.