

Regulators seek authority to revoke nursery shipping permits

Oregon Department of Agriculture also proposes license fee increases

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Farm regulators in Oregon want the authority to revoke shipping permits from nurseries that risk spreading plant diseases.

Under Senate Bill 256, the Oregon Department of Agriculture could block nurseries from shipping if they don't comply with interstate standards for plant cleanliness.

The bill is intended as a last resort for dealing with nurseries that blatantly disregard procedures meant to control plant diseases, said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

"It's a nuclear deterrent, in large measure, for folks who are shipping infected plants negligently," he said. "There's a big difference in having a problem and perpetuating that problem."

While the vast majority of nurseries take great care to ensure they're shipping clean plants, the few companies that disregard phytosanitary hazards pose a danger to the rest of the industry, Stone said.

Competitors could try to stop shipments from Oregon from entering their state if a disease incident occurs, so SB 256 aims to alleviate such market concerns, he said.

"There are a lot of people who want our market share," Stone said.

ODA can currently halt individual shipments of nursery stock, but the agency has limited resources to monitor thousands of trucks that leave the state each spring, he said.

Suspending or revoking a shipping permit is a more efficient way of keeping potentially diseased plants out of commerce, he said.

Rather than inspecting each load, ODA can simply halt all shipments from a nursery until a disease problem is back under control, said Gary McAninch, manager of the agency's nursery and Christmas tree program.

"A lot of this comes out of the sudden oak death experience we had," he said, referring to a fungal pathogen that led to federal regulations on West Coast nurseries. "It's the one disease that causes the most concern among states that receive nursery stock from us."

The expectation is that ODA will be in consistent contact with a grower who is "heading down this path" toward revocation, Stone said.

Oregon's nursery industry prides itself on working closely with regulators and OAN's board of directors requested that ODA expand its authority, he said. "We asked for this."

As part of SB 256, the ODA would also increase the maximum fees for nursery licenses and upgrade its inspection process to reflect national trends in plant disease prevention.

The agency's current proposal would raise the cap on license fees from \$20,000 to \$25,000, but the OAN wants the cap increased to \$40,000. The share of gross revenue paid by nurseries known as a "millage rate" — a mill is one-tenth of a percent — would grow from five mills to seven mills under ODA's proposal and to 10 mills under OAN's amended version. License costs for Christmas tree growers would also increase under the legislation.

Actual fees paid by nurseries would still be tiered based on their size, said Lisa Hanson, ODA's deputy director, during a March 11 hearing on the bill before the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

OAN prefers a larger increase in the license fee limit, which would let ODA gradu-

ally bump up actual fees over time, rather than having the agency return to the legislature for smaller hikes.

The bill would clarify the agency's inspection and certification authority to allow for a "systems-based approach," which would rely on growers to show they're following sanitation and training protocols for plant health, said Hanson.

The method is "document heavy," with the ODA auditing nursery records to ensure they follow the right steps, she said.

Under SB 256, the agency would have more flexibility to adopt plant health protocols that are being implemented by USDA, said Stone.

The systems approach focuses on preventing diseases instead of tracking down their origin after they've been discovered, he said.

"The certification would not hinge on us inspecting plants, it would hinge on ensuring the system is working," McAninch said.

Blueberry growers advised to tread carefully

Market contending with growing supplies of crop

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Farmers should find a market for their blueberries before planting their first bush because there's no shortage of supplies, experts say.

Blueberry production has climbed in recent years, so new growers need to find a niche rather than assume buyers will readily absorb more of the crop, according to speakers at Oregon State University's recent Blueberry School.

"If you are just sticking 20 acres in the ground because you like blueberries, you're going to be eating a lot of them yourself probably," said Rod Cook, president of Ag-View Consulting, who tracks supply trends.

Inventories of frozen blueberries — traditionally an important sales channel for Northwest growers — have been



Courtesy of Oregon State University

mounting, with production outpacing sales, he said.

According to USDA's most recent statistics, more than 187.5 million pounds of blueberries were in cold storage in late January, up 9 percent since last year.

To put that in perspective, there were fewer than 83 million pounds of blueberries in cold storage at the same point in 2007, the last time OSU held its Blueberry School.

While frozen inventories have continued to trend higher, the market should remain stable if blueberry usage also increases, Cook said.

"Big numbers don't scare

me as long as we're seeing movement in big numbers as well," he said.

To compete in the current market, new growers need to evaluate and develop their strengths — for example, if they have experience with organic production or are situated to capitalize on seasonal gaps in supply, Cook said.

Farmers should also identify their weaknesses, such as a lack of labor or cooling equipment, he said.

"The more planning you do, the better off you're going to be," said Jeff Malensky, vice president of international sales for the Oregon Berry Packing

Co. Since the early 2000s, farmers have increasingly been expected to document their field and irrigation practices to ensure a safe product, he said.

In the fresh market, retailers have also become more selective as blueberry production has grown, said Derek Peacock, procurement manager for the HBF International fruit marketing company.

Buyers want blueberries to be traceable and are asking to verify information about pesticide usage and other practices with third party auditors, he said.

It's also important for farmers to work with packers and marketers to plan for when large quantities become available, Peacock said.

As long as farmers are prepared to put in extra effort to mitigate risks for suppliers, "there is room in the marketplace for more fruit," he said.

Though conditions are tough, growers can still be profitable if they economize skillfully, said Bernadine Strik, berry crops specialist at OSU.

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