

PCN-affected spud growers plead case to lawmakers

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Spud growers who have spent nine years dealing with federal regulations designed to eradicate potato pale cyst nematode from a small area in East Idaho traveled to the state's Capitol March 16 to plead for help.

They asked for more manageable regulations and less strict testing requirements that they said are far tougher than world standards.

Steve France, who has farmed for 50 years, said the reg-

ulations are difficult to live with.

"The last two years have really hammered us financially wise," he told members of the House Agricultural Affairs Committee. "It's about more than we can take."

PCN, a parasite that can significantly reduce potato yields, was first detected in Idaho in a small area around Shelley in 2006. Eighteen growers in that area are in a federal PCN monitoring program, which regulates 7,734 acres, including 26 infested fields encompassing 2,897 acres.

Shelley farmer Bryan Searle said those growers have faced stiff and unnecessary regulations and they have been asked to bite the bullet for the entire Idaho potato industry by helping ensure the parasite is not spread.

"If we're going to carry one for the team, we need help to continue," he said. "We feel it's time we received ... some financial help."

Searle and France were among 16 growers who came to Boise to educate lawmakers about the PCN regulations and the financial diffi-

culties they are facing.

Mark Mickelsen of Rigby said the regulations have cost his farm \$700,000 in the past six months alone.

Kirt Oler said they cost him about \$40,000 this past year and he has decided to no longer grow potatoes.

"I'm much too small to afford something like that," he said.

A bill supported by the growers that would have allowed them to ask the Idaho Potato Commission for a refund of the state's potato assessment was rejected by the House ag-

committee earlier in the session.

Stephanie Mickelsen, Mark Mickelsen's wife, said growers in the PCN monitoring area have their soil tested at a rate of up to 40 pounds per acre, while the world standard is 1.3 pounds per acre.

"We're putting the Idaho potato industry at a huge disadvantage if we continue to test at such high rates in Idaho and they aren't going to have the same testing in other places," she said.

Searle said he believes if other states and countries tested for PCN at the same

rate growers in Idaho's PCN area are tested at, the parasite would be discovered in a lot of other places.

"These testing rates are way beyond what the rest of the world is doing," said Jared Wattenbarger, president of the newly formed "Idaho PCN Group."

Rep. Ken Andrus, a Republican rancher from East Idaho and chairman of the House ag committee, said he invited the growers to Boise so lawmakers could better understand the situation they are facing.

National wheat yield contest planned

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press



John O'Connell/Capital Press

The 2015 spring wheat crop is planted in southeast Idaho. The National Wheat Foundation is reviving a U.S. yield competition to drive innovation in the industry.

The National Wheat Foundation plans to revive a nationwide yield competition, hoping it will drive grower innovation and lead to improved production methods.

The industry last hosted a yield competition in 1993, said National Wheat Foundation Chairman Dusty Tallman.

Tallman said the foundation — a sister organization of the National Association of Wheat Growers tasked with wheat promotion and education — hopes to iron out rules in April and have the contest ready for winter wheat planted this fall. Companies including John Deere, BASF and Monsanto have already agreed to be partners.

The foundation met in January in Washington, D.C., for its first contest organizational meeting.

Tallman said U.S. corn and soybean growers have learned from top growers in their own yield competitions, which have spurred the implementation of cutting-edge production methods into more fields.

"The reason we want to do this is to help drive innovation in the industry," Tallman said. "We look at what corn has done with increases in their yields. Wheat yields have continued to grow, but it's a fraction of corn."

The National Corn Growers Association awards trophies to the top three growers in each of six classes — based on soil type, irrigation or dryland and tillage — for each corn state. Rachel Jungermann-Orf, manager of the corn yield competition, said 415 growers were recognized as winners in 2014, and seed and

equipment companies offered special prizes to winning producers who used their products.

The association requires minimum 10-acre plots, and many growers later expand practices used in their contest plots to their other commercial plots, she said. In 2014, she said six corn contest growers topped 400 bushels per acre.

"It's a good trial and error for them," Jungermann-Orf said, adding the contest also highlights hybrid advances made by seed companies.

Tallman said the wheat com-

petition will likely be divided by region, with subcategories for irrigated or dryland, winter or spring planting and the six different wheat classes. He hopes land-grant universities will get involved and share their latest research with growers seeking to push yields.

Travis Jones, executive director of Idaho Grain Producers Association, said Idaho should be competitive, both on dryland farms in the Northern Panhandle and irrigated farms in the south and east. Jones said Idaho's wheat industry has advocated for quality as a contest parameter.

Wheat Foundation board member Wayne Hurst, of Burley, Idaho, said U.S. wheat growers averaged in the mid-30s for bushels per acre when he was in high school, and today, that average remains in the low-40s.

In 2008, Hurst said the foundation set a goal of improving wheat yields by 20 percent over the course of a decade, and the competition is part of the effort to "send a clear signal to private researchers throughout the country that wheat growers are finally serious about improving yields."

U.S. attorney settles wildfire lawsuit with Idaho rancher

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

It began around 3 p.m. on Sept. 19, 2008, and was controlled shortly before midnight, she said.

The Castlerock fire burned 82 acres of federal land in the area of U.S. Highway 20 and Pine Featherville Road. It began about 3:30 p.m. on Sept. 15 and was suppressed in the early evening of Sept. 17, she said.

Faulkner had insurance to cover the suppression costs, she said.

The money collected will reimburse the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management for funds expended.

The settlement is not an admission that the U.S. Attorney's office had a weak case, nor is it an admission of liability by Faulkner, Howe said.

Idaho burn permits require permit-holders to provide adequate containment equipment and personnel to contain private burns. The permits also require citizens to refrain from burning in windy conditions.

The U.S. Attorney's office in Boise has settled a lawsuit for fire suppression costs against Gooding, Idaho, sheep producer John Faulkner and Faulkner Land and Livestock Co.

The office collected \$88,000 of the approximately \$124,000 in suppression costs in the case that involved two fires, the Faulkner fire in September 2008 and the Castlerock fire in September 2010.

Both fires started when prescribed burns on Faulkner's private land near Gooding escaped to federal land on a windy afternoon, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Amy Howe.

Faulkner did have a burn permit, she said.

Both fires occurred on Forest Service land, threatening additional federal land, and required both ground and air attacks, Howe said.

The Faulkner fire burned 21 acres of federal land in the area of Little Canyon Creek and Bennett Mountain Road.

Ag-backed trail bill passes Idaho Legislature

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — A bill barring the use of eminent domain to build recreational paths is headed to Gov. Butch Otter for his signature.

It is supported by the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation and other agricultural organizations.

In February, the Senate voted 20-13 to pass S1044, and the House approved it with a 54-15-1 vote on March 16. The bill's author, Sen. Jim Guthrie, R-McCammon, said Otter plans to sign it, though a spokesman for the governor could not be reached for comment.

Guthrie, a farmer and rancher, said he became aware of the need for the legislation a few years ago, when he was a Bannock County commissioner. Property owners told him of the City of Pocatello's threats to condemn their land to connect segments of a paved path following the Portneuf River, called the Portneuf Greenway.

Guthrie said farmers and ranchers far beyond the city lim-

its were concerned by the Portneuf Greenway Foundation's goals at the time of continuing the trail for up to 30 miles into the county.

"People tend to want those greenways along the rivers, and they go right through farm land," Guthrie said. "That was a big concern of some in the agricultural community."

In 2011, as a member of Idaho's House of Representatives, Guthrie introduced the first version of the bill. It passed the House but died without a hearing in a Senate committee. Following his election to the Senate, Guthrie reintroduced the bill in 2013, but it again failed to pass out of committee. He decided to give the legislation a final try this session.

Guthrie believes building trails will still be possible, but negotiations with property owners will have to take place in good faith. Guthrie believes the bill will be important for property owners throughout the state, based on the dozens of emails he's received from Idaho city leaders opposing it.

In the case of the Portneuf Greenway, foundation board president Rory Erchul believes the bill was unnecessary. He said the board has long since abandoned plans to use eminent domain and has instead moved on to building other sections of trail, following a master plan calling for a triangle of trails around Pocatello and Chubbuck.

But Erchul also contends greenway trails serve the public good, providing nonmotorized transportation routes and enticing businesses to locate in communities. The choice of using eminent domain to complete them should be a local issue, he argued.

Erchul noted the Portneuf Greenway's former intention was to use eminent domain on public rights-of-way through private property, on river levees built and maintained with taxpayer funding.

Idaho Farm Bureau spokesman John Thompson disagrees that the public good served by trail building warrants encroaching on private property.

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