

People & Places

Center shifts focus to sage grouse

Derek Tilley and staff look for ways to help species thrive across West

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

ABEDEEN, Idaho — Derek Tilley and his staff at the USDA's Aberdeen Plant Materials Center have an overriding goal in their efforts to select hardy wildflower seed and improve practices for cultivating native plants.

In 2014, they shifted their research focus toward improving sage grouse habitat to help avert an endangered species listing for the native bird.

A listing of the sage grouse under the federal Endangered Species Act would lead to significant restrictions on many industries, including livestock grazing.

Tilley, who joined the center's staff in 2004 as a range conservationist and was promoted to manager in October, said he and his staff spend a couple of weeks each summer in the mountains seeking sources of native plant seeds. At the center's farms and greenhouses, they select for the plants that establish easily and withstand the elements, giving small amounts of their improved seed to the University of Idaho's Foundation Seed Program for propagation.

Commercial growers ac-



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Derek Tilley, manager of the USDA's Plant Materials Center in Aberdeen, Idaho, holds a tray of sulfur buckwheat, which his facility is propagating for Grand Teton National Park. His center recently switched its focus to improving sage grouse habitat.

Western Innovator Derek Tilley

Age: 42

Job: Manager of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Aberdeen Plant Materials Center

Family: Wife, Amber, and children, Nathaniel, 13, Logan, 11, Andelin, 7.

Hometown: Aberdeen, Idaho

Education: Bachelor's degree in botany, master's degree in plant taxonomy from Brigham Young University.



quire public seed from UI to increase for Conservation Reserve Program mixes, public land restoration, private grazing land improvement and oth-

er uses. The Aberdeen facility, established in 1939, is one of 27 U.S. plant materials centers. A secondary priority in Aberdeen

is developing cover crops, which are plants cultivated on agricultural land solely for soil health benefits. The center also increases seed collected from national parks for park restoration projects.

In the past, each center strove to address general regional resource concerns, but that spread their efforts too thin, Tilley said.

"Each region now has just a few areas of focus," Tilley said. "Even though we've only been focused on sage grouse for this past year, a lot of our work in the past is directly applicable."

A few years ago, Tilley's

program released Maple Grove Lewis flax, a native flower to replace European-derived flax in seed mixes. This fall, the program released seed of hoary tansyaster, a native purple aster. The center is building a supply of a native grass, world buckwheat. The plants support insects consumed by sage grouse chicks, which also feed on some of the vegetation.

Chris Colt, a U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist, said protecting and restoring habitat is among the best ways to help sage grouse.

"One of the biggest issues for sage grouse is loss of habitat from wildfires," Colt said. "Wildfire is really spurred by exotic grasses — mostly cheatgrass and Medusahead."

In Eastern Idaho's Curlew National Grassland, Colt said the center has planted test plots for the past five years, seeking plants that benefit sage grouse and compete well with invasive species.

Tilley has also applied for a Forest Service grant to investigate ways to effectively plant wildflowers and forbs in the field for the benefit of sage grouse. He hopes to experiment with snow fencing, which could trap snow and bolster growth of plants that like cool, moist conditions, and fabric, which would trap heat and moisture and stimulate growth much like in a greenhouse.

Tilley said pollinators and sage grouse benefit most from "islands" of native forbs, shrubs and grasses.

USDA wants to redefine farming, limit subsidies

By MARY CLARE JALONICK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The government is revising its definition of what it means to farm, meaning some people who receive farm subsidies but don't do any of the work would receive less government cash.

Congress charged the Agriculture Department last year with creating a new definition for what it means to be "actively engaged" in farming, the criteria to receive some subsidies. USDA proposed Tuesday that farms must document that their managers put in 500 hours of substantial management work annually or 25 percent of the time necessary for the success of the farming operation to qualify.

"We want to make sure that farm program payments are going to the farmers and farm families that they are intended to help," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said.

The rules only apply to some farm businesses, however. Congress exempted family owned entities, which make up some of the country's largest



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Dry beans are harvested in a field near Wilder, Idaho, in this file photo. The USDA has announced that it is redefining farming for the purposes of determining who will receive some subsidy payments.

farms, as part of a provision in the wide-ranging farm bill that directed USDA to issue the new rules.

USDA said as many as 1,400 operations could lose eligibility under the rules, saving around \$50 million over a three-year period.

The rules are in response to concerns that some people were abusing the idea of "actively engaged" to qualify for subsidies. A report by the Government Accountability Office in 2013 looked at some farms

that received hundreds of thousands of subsidies a year and claimed that 11 or more people were actively engaged in the operation. For some operations, unlimited numbers of so-called managers can now receive payments.

Under the new rules, up to three managers per operation could receive subsidies. Farmers receive roughly \$5 billion a year under the actively engaged requirements. The definition up until now has been broad, allowing people to

claim vague "active personal management" to receive subsidies. People who don't even visit a farm can receive money, and USDA employees often have a difficult time verifying how engaged an individual is.

The proposed rule still would allow people to claim "active personal management" but defines that as the 500 hours of work or 25 percent of time. To receive payments, managers would have to document that they were directly involved in farm finances, labor management, planting, marketing or other activities directly contributing to the success of the operation.

The rule is focused on farm businesses that are organized as general partnerships, in which multiple members share management, and non-family joint ventures, which are short-term business associations among individuals or entities.

Farms that organize under those two types of business models can sometimes sidestep farm subsidy limits. The GAO report found that general partnerships and joint ventures re-

ceived a very high proportion of their subsidies through multiple members claiming that they were actively engaged in farming.

Vilsack says the rules would help "close a loophole that has been taken advantage of" by those businesses.

Farm bills passed by both the House and the Senate proposed stricter rules for which farmers could qualify, and would not have allowed anyone to have qualified under the vague classification of "active personal management." Farmers would have had to contribute labor, capital, equipment or land to qualify for money.

Instead, the final bill that emerged from House-Senate negotiations directed USDA to better define what that management is and specified that family farms could not be part of the rule.

Craig Cox of the Environmental Working Group, which has fought farm subsidies for the wealthy, called the rule "a tiny step forward."

"It doesn't get at the heart of the problem," he said.

Farmers fund new research to breed gluten-free wheat

By ROXANA HEGEMAN
Associated Press

WICHITA, Kan. — New research funded by farmers aims to breed a wheat variety for people who can't eat wheat and other grains, an endeavor that comes as wider consumer interest in gluten-free foods is booming.

The Kansas Wheat Commission is spending \$200,000 for the first two years of the project, which is meant to identify everything in wheat's DNA sequences that can trigger a re-

action in people suffering from celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder in which eating even tiny amounts of gluten — comprised of numerous, complex proteins that gives dough its elasticity and some flavor to baked goods — can damage the small intestine. The only known treatment for it is a gluten-free diet, not eating foods that contain wheat, rye, and barley.

Though celiac disease is four to five times more common now than 50 years ago, only about 1 percent of the

world's population is believed to suffer from it, and just a fraction have been diagnosed. But the gluten-free food business has skyrocketed in the last five years, driven in part by non-celiac sufferers who are either intolerant to gluten or following a gluten-free fad diet because they believe it may help them lose weight or that it's somehow healthier.

Sales of gluten-free snacks, crackers, pasta, bread and other products reached \$973 million in the U.S. in 2014, up from

\$810 million the previous year, according to a January report by consumer research firm Packaged Facts, which analyzed the sales of hundreds of explicitly labeled and marketed gluten-free products and brands at supermarkets, drugstores, and mass merchandisers.

Supporters of the Kansas research, though, say this isn't a way to regain market share.

"If you know you are producing a crop that is not tolerated well by people, then it's the right thing to do," according to

the project's lead researcher, Chris Miller, senior director of research for Engrain, a Kansas company that makes products to enhance the nutrition and appearance of products made by the milling and cereal industry.

Gluten-free foods are a niche product, and in the broader context of the world's wheat markets, it is not a driving factor, according to Dan O'Brien, extension grain market specialist at Kansas State University. "I anticipate it will develop as a specialty market," he said.

Calendar

APRIL OREGON

April 9 — Oregon Mint Commission budget hearing, 10 a.m., Hood River Hotel, 102 Oak St., Hood River, 503-364-2944

April 18 — Oregon Women for Agriculture Auction and Dinner, Linn County Fair and Expo Center, Albany, 503-243-FARM (3276), <http://owaonline.org/>

April 25-26 — AgFest, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday, Oregon State Fairgrounds, Salem, \$9 for adults, under 12 are free, <http://www.oragfest.com>

April 28 — Oregon Blueberry Commission budget hearing, noon, Chemeketa Events at Winema, Room 210, 4001

Winema Place, NE, Salem, 503-364-2944

CALIFORNIA

April 18-21 — California State FFA Conference, Selland Arena, Fresno, www.calaged.org/stateconvention

IDAHO

April 8-11 — State FFA Leadership Conference, College of Southern Idaho, Twin Falls, www.idffaoundation.org/

April 24 — Forester map and compass workshop, 9 a.m.-4 p.m., University of Idaho Extension office, 1808 N. Third St., Coeur d'Alene, \$10 fee, 208-446-1683, <http://www.uidaho.edu/extension/forestry/content/calendarofevents>

WASHINGTON

April 4 — Washington State Sheep Producers Lambing and Management School, Sprague, \$50 (member), \$60 (non-member), 509-257-2230, dvm@feustelfarms.com

April 6-11 — Washington State Sheep Producers Shearing School, Moses Lake

April 16-19 — Washington State Spring Fair, Puyallup, 2-10 p.m. Thursday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday, <http://www.thefair.com/spring-fair/>

MAY

WASHINGTON

May 14-16 — Washington FFA Convention, Washington State University, Pullman,

www.washingtonffa.org/convention

CALIFORNIA

May 1-2 — Forest Landowners of California annual meeting, Holiday Inn, Auburn, www.forestlandowners.org/

JUNE CALIFORNIA

June 15-26 — Postharvest Technology Short Course, University of California-Davis, <http://postharvest.ucdavis.edu/Education/PTShortCourse/>

IDAHO

June 13 — Sheep in the Foot-hills, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., Boise Foot-hills Learning Center, 3188 Sunset Peak Road, 208-493-2530, Foot-hillsLearningCenter-Parks@cityof-boise.org

WASHINGTON

June 20-21 — Glenwood Ketchum Kalf Rodeo, 1 p.m. each day, 509-364-3371, <http://business.gorge.net/glenwoodrodeo/>

June 21-23 — Washington Potato and Onion Association Annual Convention, Northern Quest Resort and Casino, Spokane wa.potato.onion@gmail.com

JULY IDAHO

July 11 — 94th annual Idaho Ram Sale, Twin Falls County Fairgrounds, Filer, 208-334-2271 or iwga@earthlink.net

NOVEMBER CALIFORNIA

Nov. 17-18 — Drone World Expo, San Jose Convention Center, www.droneworldexpo.com

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