

People & Places

Researcher studies alternative crops, organics

Bill Buhrig adds local knowledge of ag to his OSU Extension work

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Oregon State University researcher Bill Buhrig wants to help local farmers find alternative crops to plug into their rotations and establish a blueprint for growing organic crops in Eastern Oregon.

Buhrig was born and raised on a farm in the area, so he has an intimate understanding of the local agricultural production system and its challenges.

Buhrig, 39, says he “never really left home” when he accepted the job as a crop agent with OSU’s Malheur County Extension office 18 months ago.

Even while working for six years as a scientific aide at University of Idaho’s Parma research center 18 miles away, he commuted to work from his farm in Vale, Ore.

Fellow OSU researcher Stuart Reitz said Buhrig’s knowledge of the local agricultural industry, as well as his familiarity with the world-leading research on onions and potatoes being conducted at the Parma station,



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Oregon State University crop agent Bill Buhrig holds a bag of edible pumpkin seeds that were grown at OSU’s Ontario research station last year. Buhrig hopes to help local farmers find alternative crops, such as pumpkin seeds, that they can plug into their rotations.

make him a valuable addition to the Malheur County Extension office.

“He knows a lot of farmers in this area, they know him and he has a very good relationship with growers around the community,” Reitz said.

“He’s a tremendous asset to the office.”

One of Buhrig’s main goals is to help local farmers find alternative crops they can plug in to their typical four- or five-year rotations.

In 2014, he began explor-

Western Innovator Bill Buhrig

Title: Crop agent, Oregon State University’s Malheur County Extension office

Age: 39

Degrees: Master’s degree in plant science, University of Idaho; bachelor’s degree in business administration, Eastern Oregon University

Family: Wife, Tracey; three children.



ing whether pumpkin seed for snacks could be grown profitably in the valley.

After a local economic development agency informed researchers that some buyers wanted to know whether it was plausible to grow pumpkin seeds in the valley, Buhrig and other researchers planted 200 row feet of the crop.

“We learned just enough to want to learn more,” he said. “It’s piqued my curiosity.”

Buhrig will replicate the trial this year, and if the results are successful, researchers will start working with a handful of growers to continue exploring the idea.

“From an agronomic perspective, it seems plausible,” he said. “From a logistics perspective, we still have some work to do.”

Potatoes and onions, two of the region’s main cash crops, are grown on 4- or 5-year rotations. A pumpkin seed crop

also requires that same type of rotation, Buhrig said.

“This is something that could be dropped right into a crop rotation in this valley,” he said.

Buhrig also wants to develop a blueprint for organic production in the valley. A lot of farmers in the area want to explore the organic market but there is no real agronomic game plan for growing organic crops in the area, he said.

Buhrig is applying for grants that would enable him to set up a 30-acre trial on a full-circle pivot. Multiple crops would be grown on half the acres using conventional methods followed in the valley and those same crops would be grown on the other side using no-till organic methods.

“I would like to blueprint out reduced or no-till organic production in this area,” Buhrig said. “That’s a big goal of mine.”

Scientists to study grassland-nesting shorebird in 3 states

By KEITH RIDLER
Associated Press

BOISE (AP) — A large shorebird that nests in grasslands and uses its extra-long bill to pluck crustaceans from mudflats and wolf spiders from animal burrows will be the subject of an intense study this summer in three states.

The long-billed curlew is of particular interest to researchers because its downward curving bill allows it to live in a range of habitats, including cattle-grazed pastures, but populations appear to be flagging.

“They’re generalists,” said scientist Jay Carlisle of the Intermountain Bird Observatory at Boise State University, noting that the curlews also use native grass areas, mudflats and estuaries. “That would suggest flexibility. If there is decline, what does that mean with how we’re impacting them?”

This spring researchers in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming plan to put satellite transmitters

on 19 of the ground nesting birds in hopes of getting a better understanding of the challenges they face. That’s more than triple the number of birds currently being tracked. The curlews can be up to several feet long, weigh several pounds and have bills longer than 8 inches.

Scientists say the birds face challenges on breeding grounds as well as on wintering areas in central California. Some birds also winter in Mexico.

One of the largest known breeding populations of the birds in the West was in southwest Idaho at the Long-billed Curlew Habitat Area of Critical Environmental Concern, a 45,000-acre area of mostly U.S. Bureau of Land Management land between Parma and Emmet.

About 2,000 curlews used the area in the 1970s. Current estimates put the number at less than 200.

“We’re talking about a 90 percent loss over a 30-year period, and we’ve continued to see



A long-billed curlew keeps watch over its nest in the tall grasses of The Nature Conservancy’s Flat Ranch Preserve in Island Park, Idaho. The long-billed curlew, a large shorebird that nests in grasslands and uses its extra-long beak to pluck crustaceans from mudflats and wolf spiders from animal burrows, will be the subject of an intense study this summer.

Megan Grover-Cereda
The Nature Conservancy
via AP

a drop in the last six years,” Carlisle said.

There is no hunting season for curlews, which are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. But two birds with satellite transmitters have been shot in the area, and researchers have

found five others also killed by gunfire.

Another problem, said Matt McCoy of the BLM, is off-road vehicle riders that create unauthorized trails through the grasslands.

“The unfortunate part is we

haven’t done any public outreach or signage,” McCoy said. “This year we’re making a very concentrated effort.”

He said the agency plans to close some of the illegal off-road paths and is putting up signs alerting visitors to the significance of the area. The agency recently published a brochure with more detailed information.

The decline of curlews in southwest Idaho led scientists to wonder about other breeding populations, Carlisle said.

That has led to studies at The Nature Conservancy’s Flat Ranch Preserve in eastern Idaho and the Big Creek Ranch in the Pahsimeroi Valley in central Idaho. In Montana, researchers plan to study curlews at a private ranch south of Missoula.

In Wyoming, researchers are working at The Nature Conservancy’s Heart Mountain Ranch Preserve near Cody, the National Elk Refuge near Jackson Hole, a site in Grand Teton National Park, and another near the town of Daniel.

Popular pesticide hurts wild bees in major field study

By SETH BORENSTEIN
AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON — A common type of pesticide is dramatically harming wild bees, according to a new in-the-field study that outside experts say may help shift the way the U.S. government looks at a controversial class of chemicals.

But in the study published by the journal Nature, honeybees — which get trucked from place to place to pollinate major crops like almonds — didn’t show the significant ill effects that wild

cousins like bumblebees did. This is a finding some experts found surprising.

A second study published in the same journal showed that in lab tests bees are not repelled by the pesticides and in fact may even prefer pesticide-coated crops, making the problem worse.

Bees of all kinds — crucial to pollinating plants, including major agricultural crops — have been in decline for several reasons. Pesticide problems are just one of many problems facing pollinators; this is separate from colony collapse disorder, which devastated honeybee populations in recent years but is now abating,

experts said.

Exposure to neonicotinoid insecticides reduced the density of wild bees, resulted in less reproduction, and colonies that didn’t grow when compared to bees not exposed to the pesticide, the study found.

Scientists in Sweden were able to conduct a study that was in the wild, but still had the in-the-lab qualities of having control groups that researchers covet. They used 16 patches of landscape, eight where canola seeds were coated with the pesticide and eight where they weren’t, and compared the

two areas.

When the first results came in, “I was quite, ‘Oh my God,’” said study lead author Maj Rundlof of Lund University. She said the reduction in bee health was “much more dramatic than I ever expected.”

In areas treated with the pesticide, there were half as many wild bees per square meter than there were in areas not treated, Rundlof said. In the pesticide patches, bumblebee colonies had “almost no weight gain” compared to the normal colonies that gained about a pound, she said.

Calendar

Saturday, May 2

Forest Landowners of California Annual Meeting, 8 a.m. Holiday Inn, Auburn, Calif.

Wednesday, May 6

Roots of Resilience, Rejuvenating Grasslands through Grazing Management, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Washington Family Ranch, Antelope, Ore., 360-220-5103. Create resilience, improve production, increase profit and enhance quality of life.

Thursday, May 7

Roots of Resilience, Rejuvenating Grasslands through Grazing Management, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Washington Family Ranch, Antelope, Ore.,

360-220-5103. Placing the animals in the right place at the right time for the right reason, or learn about the importance of monitoring — Are you taking full advantage of your most scare resource, rainfall?

Saturday, May 9

Northeast Washington Haygrowers Association spring meeting, 8:15 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Dun Renton Ranch, Deer Park, 509-276-5955. Spring meeting includes pesticide applicator recertification credits, field tours, equipment displays, weed identification and management, nutrient management.

Garden Expo 2015, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Spokane Community College,

Spokane, 509-535-8434. Over 250 garden-related vendors. Free admission. Presented by The Inland Empire Gardeners, gardenexpo@comcast.net, www.tieg.org

Wednesday, May 13

19th Annual Distillers Grains Symposium, 7 a.m.-11 p.m. Sheraton Crown Center, Kansas City, Mo.

Designing and Establishing Insectary Plantings Field Course, 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Two cherry orchards in The Dalles, Ore., 541-737-6272. A field course on insectary plantings in commercial orchards and the benefits they bring. Drew Merritt, co-owner of Humble Roots Farm and Nursery; Gwendolyn Ellen, Farms-

caping for Beneficials Coordinator at OSU, and farmer hosts Mike Omeg and Tim Dahle will share tips and challenges in establishing orchard insectary plantings. The course will be at Omeg Family Orchards and Dahle Orchards. Participants must provide transportation.

Thursday, May 14

19th Annual Distillers Grains Symposium, 7 a.m.-11 p.m. Sheraton Crown Center, Kansas City, Mo.

Washington FFA Convention, 8 a.m. Washington State University, Pullman.

Friday, May 15

Washington FFA Convention, 8 a.m. Washington State University, Pullman.

Saturday, May 16

Washington FFA Convention, 8 a.m. Washington State University, Pullman.

PerryDale Parents Club Taste of Italy Dinner and Auction, 4-9 p.m. Polk County Fairgrounds, Rickreall, 503-932-0558. Perrydale Parents Club fundraiser to supplement educational needs of students.

Wednesday, May 20

Seafood HACCP Segment II, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. University of Idaho, Boise, 208-364-6188. This workshop is for seafood processor personnel who develop, reassess and modify the HACCP Plan and manage verification activities.

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