

Welcome Idaho rains also raise crop disease risk

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

ABERDEEN, Idaho — Crop experts warn a May shift toward cool and wet weather that's dramatically improved the irrigation outlook has also heightened the risk of disease and created other challenges for Southern Idaho farmers.

The recent string of storms dumped 4 to 6 inches of rain throughout Southern and Eastern Idaho as of May 26, with more storms in the forecast, said Ron Abramovich, water supply specialist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Though the rain has been timely following three months of dry and unseasonably warm weather, it's created ideal conditions for stripe rust to spread in wheat, said University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall. In barley, Marshall said scald, net blotch and the spot



form of net blotch have been developing in the cool, moist conditions.

She said stripe rust has been reported in Weiser, Parma, Twin Falls, Hansen and

Wheat in Aberdeen, Idaho, begins to yellow due to recent frost damage amid a stretch of cool, moist weather. University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall believes the conditions could heighten disease pressure, though the rain has been otherwise welcome following a dry spring.

Submitted by Juliet Marshall

at the Teton Research and Extension Center, and should soon begin surfacing in Eastern Idaho fields.

She's advised grain growers to spray full rates of fungicides with their herbicides. She said a second application of fungicides may be necessary, especially on spring grains, and growers should carefully scout their fields.

"(Stripe rust) definitely has great conditions for a flare-

up," Marshall said. "We're seeing problems everywhere with some of the diseases."

Cooler temperatures have also taken a toll on crops. Throughout the Aberdeen area, Marshall has seen widespread yellowing in barley, which she attributes to damage caused by frost on May 10.

Declo grower Mark Darrington has seen stripe rust spores in his sage brush, but his wheat fields have thus far been protected by fungicides he applied with his herbicides. He's waiting to see if a second fungicide application is necessary.

In potatoes, Mike Larsen, manager with 4D Farms in Rupert, said weeds are emerging where rains have diluted herbicides. He's concerned herbicides may have leached into the spud root zone, which could potentially cause crop damage. Furthermore, his corn planting has

fallen behind schedule.

Aberdeen grower Kim Whalen believes moist conditions may have elevated the risk of rhizoctonia in spuds and sugar beets. Jerome County grower Randy Grant said the rains have replenished soil moisture, but he's also got 1,000 acres of hay past its prime and awaiting cutting and dry beans that need to be planted once dry weather returns.

In Raft River, some of the moisture fell as hail, damaging patches of sugar beets in grower Mike Wheeler's fields. He said hail forced one of his neighbors to replant some of his beet acres.

Nonetheless, the growers agree they're better off for having the rain.

"The rain was a huge blessing to water users, absolutely a huge, huge blessing," Darrington said. "The question is, when does a blessing become a curse?"

Environmental group lauds farms' water conservation, urges more to join efforts

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — A California environmental group credits farmers with making strides in improving irrigation efficiency in recent years but asserts more could be done.

For instance, at least 40 percent of farms still rely on outdated irrigation systems and should take advantage of state and federal grants to help pay for upgrades, argues Kathryn Phillips, director of Sierra Club California.

The group also calls for the state or a consortium of groups to advance policies to better manage groundwater and buy about 100,000 acres of degraded farmland on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, some of which could be used for solar farms.

"We may see changes" in the next few years in the kinds of crops that are planted, Phillips told the Capital Press. "But I don't see us moving away from having a lot of agriculture in the state because there are just lots of areas in the state that are good places for agriculture, and we have a lot of people to feed.

"My position has always been ... it's not our business to tell farmers what to grow," she said. "It's our business to tell agencies they should give clear signals that agriculture is only getting as much water as the environment can afford to give to agriculture."

Phillips' comments come as farmers and environmentalists have been at the center of an intense debate over water use as California endures its fourth straight year of drought. Some environmental groups, such as Restore the Delta, have criticized Gov.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

A pump takes water from a main canal south of Mendota, Calif., and sends it to a farm. Sierra Club California credits farmers with recent gains in water efficiency but says more can be done to conserve.

Jerry Brown for mostly sparing agriculture from mandatory water cutbacks imposed on cities this spring.

In turn, many farmers say they're already saving as much water as they can amid a second year of surface water shutoffs and cutbacks, and they complain that state and federal water agencies haven't made similar cuts to environmental uses of water.

An estimated 400,000 acres of cropland were fallowed last year to save water and between 600,000 and 1 million acres will be fallowed this year, according to state officials and farm groups.

"There's no way that we can conserve our way out of this problem," said Gary Beene, a Helm, Calif., almond, cotton and tomato grower. "If they could capture some of that water when it's running through the (Sacramento-San Joaquin River)

Delta, we might be able to solve some of this."

The level of water conservation among growers may depend on the region, said Kevin Greer, who operates a mobile irrigation laboratory for the Tehama County Resource Conservation District. A similar mobile lab in the southern San Joaquin Valley covers an area that is "almost 98 percent micro-systems" and makes as many as 170 contacts with growers a year, Greer said.

"We have a lot more systems up here (in Northern California) that are not as efficient," he said, noting that about 35 percent of micro-irrigation systems he tests have problems with distribution uniformity.

Greer said the number of calls he gets from growers has gone way up during the drought. He had about 50 farm evaluations scheduled

even before the season started this year, and he expects to do more than 100 farm visits.

Sierra Club California — the legislative and regulatory advocacy arm for the larger Sierra Club organization — notes that total crop-applied water fell by 15 percent between 1967 and 2007, according to the state Department of Water Resources. But flood irrigation in the state still uses about 13.5 million acre-feet of water per year, the organization contends.

Phillips also said ag has been "its own worst enemy" by fighting groundwater monitoring and management regulations enacted by the Legislature last year that will save their water source in the long run.

"When you talk to anybody who's involved in water policy ... they need data," Phillips said.

Conservation forms due June 1 to be eligible for crop insurance benefits

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Producers seeking crop insurance benefits through the USDA's Farm Services Agency have until June 1 to file a conservation certification form.

Farmers must file a Highly Erodible Land Conservation and Wetland Conservation Certification form, commonly referred to as an AD-1026, to be eligible for insurance premium subsidies.

Most producers already have a conservation compliance certification on file because it's required to participate in other USDA programs, but specialty crop producers who aren't otherwise involved may lack one.

According to the Portland office of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, 11,029 producers in California, 2,260 in Wash-

ington, 791 in Oregon and 530 in Idaho are receiving crop insurance benefits but haven't filed a certification form.

Producers can file a form by June 1 and work out the details of conservation plans later, Oregon NRCS spokeswoman Tracy Robillard said. Producers should contact their local county service office for more information. By filing a certification form, farmers promise they will not plant or produce a commodity on highly erodible land without following a conservation plan or system approved by NRCS. They also agree not to plant a crop on a converted wetland, or convert a wetland for that purpose.

The form is not specific to a particular crop, and it covers all land that a producer farms, according to NRCS.

WSU proceeds with McFerson consideration

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

PULLMAN, Wash. — Washington State University is working to hire Jim McFerson as the new director of the WSU Tree Fruit Research and Extension Center in Wenatchee.

McFerson, 64, is manager of the Washington Tree Fruit Research Commission, also in Wenatchee. WSU is considering allowing him to hold both state jobs with a contract designed to avoid conflicts of interest. The commission awards grants for WSU research.

"We're framing a contract to address some issues," Ron Mittelhammer, dean of WSU's College of Agricultural Human and Natural Resource Sciences, told Capital Press.

"We had a productive and supportive meeting with the executive committee of the commission and discussed some behavioral and procedural parameters of how we might negotiate regarding a possible offer," Mittelhammer said.

He said he is working with the state Attorney General's Office to draft a contract that ultimately has to be accepted by WSU Provost Dan Bernardo and McFerson.

"We're trying to pay attention to faculty and commission input. We are trying to make this happen, but it's not a done deal," Mittelhammer said.

The aim, he said, would be to have McFerson transition out of the job at the commission and be solely at the center. McFerson would not receive the full salaries of both jobs but would be offered a single salary that would be paid partly by the university and commission, Mittelhammer said.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Jim McFerson, manager of the Washington Tree Fruit Research Commission in Wenatchee, is shown in this file photo.

Jay Brunner, retiring in August as center director and entomology professor, was paid \$123,754 in 2013, according to the state Office of Financial Management. Capital Press has been unable to obtain McFerson's salary.

The commission is a state agency but is governed by industry members. It collects about \$4 million annually in assessments on growers for tree fruit research and awards about \$1.5 million to \$2 million annually in research grants to WSU.

Mittelhammer has said it is a direct conflict of interest for anyone to be in a position to influence awarding grants and be the recipient. He has said a contract could be written to avoid that.

The center operates with a \$4 million annual budget. It has 50 full-time and 20 seasonal employees and more than 100 research and extension projects involving many aspects of growing, harvesting, storing, grading and packing tree fruit.

Potandon's spud promotion truck set to roll

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — The Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck won't be the only unique vehicle making a national tour this summer to promote spud consumption.

Like IPC's iconic 6-ton replica Russet on a flatbed, a truck advertising Potandon Produce spuds will soon be making its fourth U.S. trek.

Potandon, working in partnership with the Tacoma, Wash.-based seasoning and sauce manufacturer Johnny's Fine Foods, built a food truck resembling a 1950s diner, which will offer free samples at grocery store parking lots, county fairs, corporate luncheons and other events and locations throughout the U.S.

The truck will start its tour in Salt Lake City in June, making stops in Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, South Dakota, Montana, Washington, North Dakota, Minnesota, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland through the fall. The tour will end with an appearance at the Pro-



Courtesy of Potandon Produce

Idaho Falls-based Potandon Produce has a food truck resembling a 1950s diner that travels the country promoting its products with free samples.

duce Marketing Association's Foodservice Conference & Expo Oct. 21-25 in Atlanta.

Potandon is updating its website, www.potandon.com, with features pertaining to the truck, hoping to capture some of the same social media buzz that IPC's truck has enjoyed, said Rebekah Clark, the company's marketing coordinator. Potandon plans to Tweet locations where the truck will be arriving, offer information on Facebook and

host social media contests, including drawings for prizes for those who share their photographs and personal experiences involving the truck, Clark said.

The truck has emphasized Potandon's colorful line of Klondike specialty potatoes. Clark said this year's tour will focus on Potandon mini potatoes, which come with yellow skin and yellow flesh, red skin and yellow flesh, red skin and white flesh, purple

skin and purple flesh and mixed medley packs.

"We've actually seen a consistent uptick in our volume on our mini-program," Clark said. "The last report I saw, we were 10 to 15 percent growth year over year in our mini-program alone."

Truck visitors are given free samples of Potandon products featuring Johnny's seasoning. Clark said Potandon plans to work with participating stores to carry greater volumes of the products because most retailers sell out of them after the truck arrives.

Clark said Potandon has also organized free samples inside stores, but the truck gives the company greater freedom of preparation and makes a strong impression. She believes it's changed shopping habits of consumers, who typically limit themselves to the same dozen or so produce items when they shop.

"I think we're pretty unique," Clark said. "I haven't heard of anybody else doing a (free sample food truck) on this scale anywhere else."