

ICA program pairs ranchers with cover crops

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho Cattle Association is promoting a program to help ranchers in need of pasture capitalize on the growing popularity of cover crops on Idaho farms.

Farmers plant cover crops, often after commercial crops are harvested, specifically for the soil health benefits they provide, such as reduced erosion, improved moisture penetration, nitrogen fixation, natural fumigation and added organic matter.

ICA's website, www.idahocattle.org, links to its new Cover Crop Pasture Exchange, a website where ranchers in need of pasture and land owners with cover crops or pasture available for grazing can fill out forms specifying their needs.

ICA provides contact lists to farmers and ranchers, who can then reach out to one another and make their own arrangements.

John Biar, range management specialist with the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, said his agency realized

the need for the program two years ago, when ISDA received several calls from ranchers who were displaced from allotments during a bad fire season.

The following year, a drought task force comprising ISDA, the Bureau of Land Management, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, Idaho Department of Lands, the Forest Service and other agencies discussed the need to help ranchers find pasture to cope with dry range conditions. Biar said NRCS mentioned some farmers involved in its cover crop program had been leasing

their land to ranchers.

The website launched last season, but wasn't well advertised and had just a few participants. Ranchers who tried it were pleased by the weight gain of their cattle, Biar said.

ICA recently produced pamphlets regarding the program, and Biar said ISDA has been distributing them and plugging the program at local conventions.

"When demand is there and we have a big fire season or have extensive drought, I think it will be used a lot more," Biar said.



Idaho Falls grower and rancher Gary Dixon shows his grandson, Carter Hamilton, a turnip he pulled from the field he planted to provide his cattle with winter feed. Dixon had never planted a special crop for his livestock before this fall, when he was prompted to take the step by high feed prices.

John O'Connell/
Capital Press



Union County Extension agronomist Darrin Walenta talks to participants in the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center's Grass Seed Field Day May 19 about a new Ergot Alert Newsletter that the Oregon State University Extension Service is putting out.

Newsletter helps grass seed growers keep tabs on ergot

By MITCH LIES
For the Capital Press

HERMISTON, Ore. — Grass seed growers in the Columbia Basin, Grande Ronde Valley and Central Oregon this year are able to stay abreast of ergot spore production thanks to the introduction of an Ergot Alert Newsletter.

Detection of ergot spores in grass seed crops can help growers minimize the disease's yield impact and avoid unnecessary fungicide applications, according to Union County Extension agronomist Darrin Walenta.

Walenta informed growers about the newsletter at a May 19 field day at the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center.

The newsletter is being put out by the Ergot Research Team, a group of Oregon State University and USDA Agricultural Research Service researchers. It contains spore-count data collected from traps that capture airborne spores at seven monitoring sites, and ergot man-

agement recommendations.

The first newsletter, issued May 13, reported that airborne ergot spores were collected at four sites, two in perennial ryegrass seed fields and two in Kentucky bluegrass seed fields. The first ergot spores were detected on April 19 and 22 in two Umatilla County perennial ryegrass fields. On April 26 and May 1, spores were detected in two Union County Kentucky bluegrass fields.

A second newsletter, issued May 18, reported that additional spores were counted in the two Union County bluegrass fields.

The second newsletter included an advisory that fungicide applications recently made for control of stripe rust and powdery mildew will not provide protection from ergot. Those applications, the alert states, were too early to provide ergot suppression.

The newsletter also states that no action is needed at this time (on May 18), because spore density is "very, very low and flowering has not begun yet."

Grass seed crops are most susceptible to damage from ergot during flowering.

"However," the newsletter states, "it is very important to monitor fields closely and track crop-development progress." The alert also stresses the importance of timely fungicide applications and that growers should keep particularly close watch "in fields that had some level of infection in 2014."

"If you had an issue in a field last year, prioritize your monitoring efforts there," Walenta said at the field day, "because you know there will be inoculum in that field."

The research team has been working to identify methods to manage ergot since OSU Extension plant pathologist Phil Hamm first formed it five years ago. The disease, considered one of the oldest known diseases of grasses and cereals, continues to create problems in grass seed crops, particularly in perennial ryegrass and Kentucky bluegrass seed crops, where it can lower yields and render straw unusable for animal feed.

The disease infects the flower of grass plants, which

then exude a sticky substance referred to as honeydew, which attracts insects that spread the disease.

The disease eventually replaces seed with black fungal sclerotia.

Managing the disease takes a combination of cultural and chemical management, according to the May 13 newsletter. Among cultural management techniques recommended in the newsletter are to plant ergot-free seed and to rotate fields out of susceptible grasses.

The alert advises growers to consult the Pacific Northwest Plant Disease Management Handbook for fungicide products available for ergot suppression in Oregon and Washington.

At the field day, Walenta also encouraged growers to participate in an ergot survey that is designed to assess the value of the electronically distributed newsletter and to help identify more effective tools for ergot disease management.

Walenta asked growers to contact Jeremiah Dung at the Central Oregon Agricultural Research Center in Madras, 541-475-7107, for more information on the survey.

Wheat industry leader to retire from farming

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

SPOKANE — Randy Suess, a Washington wheat farmer long active in state and national industry organizations, is retiring after 30 years of farming.

Suess represented Whitman County — one of the largest wheat-producing counties in the nation — for 11 years on the Washington Grain Commission and its predecessor, the Washington Wheat Commission. He provided public relations for Washington Association of Wheat Growers for 20 years and held leadership roles with U.S. Wheat Associates in 2009-2012, serving as chairman in 2011-2012.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Washington State University winter wheat breeder Arron Carter, left, and Washington Grain Commission member Randy Suess talk during a break in the board meeting May 20 in Spokane. At the meeting, Suess — a Colfax wheat farmer — announced his plans to retire from farming after 30 years. He hopes to remain associated with the industry.

"He was very articulate and one of the better speakers that I've ever worked with," said Tom Mick, former CEO of the commission. "That went over very well at seminars and programs we put on around the world."

Suess announced during the grain commission board meeting May 20 that he plans to retire from farming after this year's harvest.

Suess has farmed for 30 years near Colfax and taught school for nine years before that.

Suess will lease his farm land and some equipment, selling the rest of the equipment.

Suess, 61, said the decision was dictated by his health. Long hours driving tractor and combine bothered one of his legs.

"I've been to lots of doctors to try to figure out what's going on," he said. "If they would have been able to fix this thing, my plan wasn't to retire for quite a while."

Suess played a "critical" role in speaking with state legislators when Washington State University Extension was experiencing budget cuts, said Steve Van Vleet, regional extension specialist in Whitman County. Van Vleet said he hopes Suess will remain on the county extension advisory committee.

"He leaves big shoes to fill," Van Vleet said. "For research and extension to be as strong as they are in Washington state, that's one of (Suess') legacies."

Mick said Suess' interest

in foreign marketing had a big impact. Roughly 85 percent of Washington wheat goes to the export market.

"He dedicated himself to that, he did a lot of traveling that took time away from the farm because he believed in the cause," Mick said.

Among the biggest accomplishments during his tenure were the merger of the state wheat and barley commissions into the grain commission, the new commission building and opening the Central America market, which once bought primarily soft red winter wheat but now buys nearly 100 percent soft white winter wheat from the Northwest.

Suess believes the industry's visits with millers and cookie manufacturers about the quality of Washington wheat resulted in the shift.

"That's a huge success story," he said.

In the future, Suess said the industry needs to maintain its marketing efforts. He expects South Asia to be the next market to expand onto, and called for an ever-increasing presence in Central and South America, which are projected to buy 50 percent of all U.S. wheat within the next five years.

"That's something we've got to keep on top of, to make sure we satisfy those customers' needs," he said.

Idaho bird deaths linked to vole poison

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

MUD LAKE, Idaho — Investigators suspect a combination of disease and consumption of a poison used for controlling rodents caused the recent widespread deaths of lesser snow geese at two Eastern Idaho lakes.

Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologists, who are assisting with an Idaho State Department of Agriculture-led investigation, estimate about 2,200 geese were found dead on the banks of Mud Lake and Market Lake.

Officials initially thought the cause was exclusively avian cholera when dead birds began surfacing in early March. While they confirmed some birds were infected with the disease, many others lacked the in-

ternal lesions and other tell-tale symptoms when biologists involved in a cleanup cut them open, said IDFG Wildlife Veterinarian Mark Drew. After finding no cholera in many of the birds he tested, Drew sent birds to Washington State University and the National Wildlife Health Laboratory in Madison, Wis., for further testing.

The labs confirmed toxic levels of zinc phosphide, a chemical regional farmers used heavily during winter and early spring to control a vole outbreak.

ISDA spokeswoman Pamm Juker said the investigation should be completed within a couple of weeks and will focus on whether farmers followed product labels and correct application rates. Juker declined to offer specific details of the ongoing investigation.

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