UI researchers study giant Palouse earthworm

No ag impact inspected, researcher says

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — Researchers at the University of Idaho hope to learn more about a native earthworm once thought extinct by building environments to observe their behavior.

Three presumed giant Palouse earthworm specimens were found in mid-May near Moscow, Idaho, two of which survived, said graduate student Chris Baugher.

Identifying them as giant Palouse earthworms would require examining them internally, but there are only "alpha taxonomists" who are able to do that, Baugher said. The procedure requires killing the worms, but the researchers hope to learn more about the worms and their burrowing habits, so they want to keep them alive. Baugher took DNA samples and hopes to develop a method where killing the worms is not necessary.

The worms were found on a site where the earthworm has been found before, said associate professor Jodi Johnson-Maynard.

The earthworm first resurfaced in 2005 after being thought extinct. Only a few specimens have ever been found.

In 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rejected environmental groups' petitions to protect the earthworm under the Endangered Species Act because it could be more widespread than originally thought, and because of a general lack of knowledge about its environment or the level of threats to its existence, according to The Associated Press. A common nightcrawler may be 4 to 5 millimeters in diameter and roughly 6 inches long. The two specimens are roughly 5 millimeters in diameter and roughly 7 to 8 inches long, Baugher said.

Johnson-Maynard doesn't foresee an impact to agricultural production as more is learned about the worms. It has never been found or suspected in an agricultural field, she said.

"The original discovery was 1897, and it was just a handwritten note (that) said they were 'abundant' — what does that mean?" Baugher said. "By 1897, everything that could be farmed was farmed."

The worm could "perhaps" migrate to a very mature no-till site close by with low disturbance, but that hasn't happened yet, she said.

Johnson-Maynard and Baugher hope to learn more about the worms' burrowing behavior and water movement and water storage in soils.

Worms can alter an environment for other organisms, affecting water infiltration, increasing nitrogen availability for plants and improving soil structure, Johnson-Maynard said.

The researchers also hope to determine whether the worms from Central Washington to the Palouse are one species, or whether there are multiple species. Johnson-Maynard said results are likely within a year.

University of Idaho researchers hope to learn more from one of the suspected giant Palouse earthworms found near Moscow, Idaho in mid-May.

Courtesy of Christopher Baugher University of Idaho

University of Idaho associate professor Jodi Johnson-Maynard looks on as graduate student Chris Baugher shows her some castings made by the newest suspected Giant Palouse earthworms May 29 at the lab in Moscow, Idaho. Baugher hopes to use DNA from the casts, or feces, to identify the earthworm.

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Grain co-op restructures from $7.9m loss in 2014

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Pendleton Grain Growers sold or closed several divisions after losing nearly $8 milllion in 2014 but has refocused on core business areas and hopes to regain profitability this year, its chief executive said.

Rick Jacobson, a Pendleton native and former Norpac executive called out of retirement in 2012 to get PGG back on its feet, said restructuring and cost containment measures implemented over the past three years are paying off.

"I'm sitting here feeling pretty optimistic," Jacobson said. "We're positioned to make money in the 2015 crop year."

PGG, a grain marketing and supply cooperative founded in 1929, spread itself too thin as it diversified, Jacobson said. The co-op jettisoned agronomy services, an auto shop, farm supply business and an irrigation service. The discontinued services accounted for about $7.5 million of the company's losses in 2014, Jacobson said.

The co-op also sold excess inventory and recapitalized its debts into a new loan package. Jacobson said PGG has a $20 million line of credit and is in good position at this point.

The troubles came to light in 2012 when the USDA temporarily suspended PGG's grain license. The suspension meant growers' grain deposits were not guaranteed and was a "serious issue," Jacobson said. The co-op's board approached Jacobson and asked him to step in as manager.

Digging into PGG's books revealed severe accounting problems, including earnings being overstated by about $10 million over the years. Jacobson said the co-op's accounting procedures were "inadequate" but said there was no evidence of fraud or criminal malfeasance.

PGG will now concentrate on grain, seed, fuel and other energy products and transportation, Jacobson. A subsidiary irrigation business, Precision Rain, operates in Island City, Ore.

PGG has a network of 19 grain elevators and serves wheat, barley, corn and canola growers.

In a prepared statement, PGG board Chairman Tim Hawkins said the co-op will provide local market services for years to come.

"We have done the hard work together," he said, "and although some of the steps were difficult, we are now in a stronger financial position and have put in place a meaningful foundation for the future."