

# Computer problem stops printing of guestworker visas

By DAN WHEAT  
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — For the second year in a row, the Washington Farm Labor Association is having trouble getting H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers processed through the Mexican-U.S. border for transport to Washington farms.

The U.S. State Department quit printing H-2A visas on June 9 with no explanation other than there is a system-wide problem, said Dan Fazio, WAFLA director in Olympia.

“We have 224 workers stranded at the border right now. They are out of money and have no place to stay. This is the

third time this year this has happened,” Fazio said.

The workers, recruited by WAFLA, arrived in Tijuana June 7 for visa appointments on June 8 and printing of visas on June 9, he said. As of June 11, they had no visas, were running out of money and were wiring employers in Washington for money or were planning to return home to southern Mexico, he said. Fazio sent a letter to Michele Bond, acting assistant secretary of consular affairs at the State Department, requesting immediate help.

There’s a 15 percent labor shortage in Washington, cherry growers are losing crop because they don’t have enough workers

and workers are needed now, Fazio said in the letter.

The workers average \$10 per day in Southern Mexico and can make \$100 to \$200 per day with H-2A jobs in Washington, he said.

The guaranteed H-2A wage in Washington and Oregon is \$12.42 per hour. Workers can make more on piece rate.

A similar shut down occurred last July when State Department said it was having trouble with a computer software program. Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Denny Heck, both Washington Democrats, worked to resolve that problem and get visas issued again after a month. WAFLA probably will assist

growers in hiring 10,000 H-2A workers this year compared to more than 7,000 last year, Fazio has said. The statewide total may hit 15,000, up from 9,077 last year, he said. He did not have numbers on how many have already come readily available.

Washington growers have embraced the program in recent years, spending more than \$50 million on housing for workers over several years, he said. Growers provide housing, wages and transportation from and back to Mexico.

WAFLA recruits, handles border crossings and transportation for about \$1,200 per person which is borne by growers.



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Oregon dryland wheat, including this test plot in Sherman County, was developing normally despite the drought until abnormally high temperatures in late May and early June. Experts now predict a significant yield drop.

## Heat wave to impact Oregon wheat yields

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press

Wheat yields are projected to take such a hit this summer that some Eastern Oregon growers may not even harvest their crop, a senior grain merchandiser said.

Sparse rainfall and diminished snowpack is the story for producers all across the West, but an unseasonable heat wave in late May and early June hit developing wheat plants at exactly the wrong time, said Dan Steiner of Pendleton Grain Growers.

Dryland wheat growers, who farm without irrigation, were hit especially hard as the National Weather Service recorded temperatures of 90, 96 and 102 degrees in the Pendleton area from May 29 to June 10.

“Production will be down significantly,” Steiner said. He estimated a 20 percent yield drop overall from the statewide average of about 60 bushels an acre.

“Some of the dryland areas are going to have zero,” he said. “Some (fields) will be abandoned.”

Steiner said the heat wave came as wheat plants were in the stage of filling out their grain kernels. Evaporation stole what little water was left for plant development, he said.

“It came at a very, very bad time,” he said. “A lot of moisture that could have gone to the kernel was simply lost.”

If temperatures had been in the 70s or 80s during that time, there would have been a chance to have an average crop, Steiner said.

As things stand, some dryland growers in parts of

Morrow, Wasco, Sherman, Umatilla and Gilliam counties may decide it’s not worth the expense of running a combine over their ground, Steiner said. Some Eastern Washington growers may be in similar situations, he said.

Steiner said growers need to harvest seven or eight bushels an acre simply to pay for the cost of operating a combine. Growers may be cushioned from some of the loss by revenue guarantees of their insurance, he said.

Steiner said he’s been in Oregon since 1988, including the past 15 years with Pendleton Grain Growers. “This is as bad as I’ve ever seen it.”

The same problems have hit wheat growers before, of course. Steiner said El Nino weather patterns always bring hot, dry summers and cold, dry winters, neither of which is good for dryland wheat.

Blake Rowe, CEO of the Oregon Wheat Commission, said hot weather also raises the protein level of soft white wheat above what Asian buyers prefer. It won’t drive customers away, but they will be aware of it, he said. Most of the wheat grown in the Pacific Northwest is exported to Japan, Korea and elsewhere, where it’s used to make crackers, cakes and other products.

Steiner, of Pendleton Grain Growers, said the bad weather this year isn’t likely to change how farmers operate. Dryland growers don’t have many options, he pointed out.

“I would imagine they’ll plant like always do, and try to be optimistic,” he said. “The timing of that rain is absolutely critical. We can’t have 100 degree days at the end of May and the first of June.”

## WSU to host look at growing grains on westside

### Mount Vernon center set for annual field day

By DON JENKINS  
Capital Press

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. — Washington State University scientists are inviting the public to tour fields planted in wheat, barley and oats to see that grains can thrive in the state’s northwest corner.

The WSU Mount Vernon Research and Extension Center will host its annual Small Grains Field Day 3 to 6 p.m. June 25. Visitors will be able to tour test plots overseen by graduate students.

WSU researchers in the Skagit Valley have experimented with growing winter wheat for the past five years. Plant breeder Steve Lyon, who supervises the cultivation, reports progress in developing varieties that are disease resistant, high yielding and embraced by bakers, including the center’s bread lab baker, Jonathan Bethony.

“It’s got to taste good,” Lyon said. “There are really unique flavors coming out of these soils.”

Washington ranks fifth among states in wheat production thanks to eastside counties, such as Whitman County, reputed to be the



Kim Binczewski/Washington State University

Washington State University senior scientific assistant Steve Lyon stands in a field of hard red winter wheat at the university’s research center in Mount Vernon. The center will host its annual Small Grains Field Day on June 25.

country’s top wheat-producing county.

Western Washington also once yielded wheat. The first commercial wheat crop in the Pacific Northwest was planted at Fort Vancouver in 1825, according to the Washington Wheat Commission.

Lyon said grains gave way in the Skagit Valley to higher-value crops such as berries, potatoes and vegetable seeds. Niche markets, however, are creating new demand for grains, such as barley for craft beers, he said.

Northwest Washington won’t challenge the Palouse as the state’s wheat heartland. But Lyon said WSU researchers are identifying grains that can be profitable for small to mid-sized farmers.

Skagit Valley farmer Dave Hedlin said oats were once a major crop on the valley when farmers relied on horses. Farmers still grow grains in rotation to break up disease cycles, he said.

Hedlin said he was optimistic about the financial opportunities grains pres-

ent. “We’ll pay attention at the grain field day and see what looks good and what doesn’t.”

Lyon said the region’s moderate climate makes for long growing seasons, but also poses the threat of diseases.

That’s good, he said, for research purposes.

“As a breeder, I kind of like disasters,” Lyon said. “If the crops fail, they fail for us. We want to make sure that they’re not going to fail for the farmer.”

The field day is free and open to the public.

## Farm, technology sectors agree Idaho can be a leader in agtech

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho could and should be a world front runner in agricultural technology, leaders of the state’s farming and technology sectors agreed June 16 during a first-ever AgriTech Summit.

The summit, which was called by Gov. Butch Otter, a farmer and rancher, is part of Idaho Department of Commerce Director Jeff Sayer’s vision to make Idaho a globally recognized leader in the so-called agtech market.

“All of the ingredients are here for Idaho to take that leadership position,” said Don Bush, vice president of marketing for Kount, a Boise-based hi-tech company. “We don’t have to take a back seat to anyone.”

The event brought together a few hundred people involved with the state’s top two economic sectors — agriculture and technology — and included panel discussions on agriculture, research and technology.

Todd Stevens, co-founder of RenewableTech Ventures, said his company has a lot of interest in agtech. “We see a lot of overlap in clean tech and agtech,” he said.

Idaho has all of the ingredients to be a world leader in agtech but needs to bring those assets together and market them better, technology industry leaders said.

“We have to come together as an agtech center and market ourselves,” said David Cohen, a technology entrepreneur who said he

believes the state’s farming sector “could greatly benefit from engaging the technology sector.”

Some of the areas the two sectors said they could work together on included data management, unmanned aerial systems, animal tracking technology, robotic harvesting, genetic engineering, irrigation systems, and data analytics and aggregation.

Dairy and cattle industry representatives said expanding tracking technology, improving feed efficiencies and identifying disease resistant traits are important issues for their industries.

North Idaho farmer Robert Blair said growers could use unmanned aerial vehi-

cles that can fly faster and cover greater distances. Current UAV technology allows them to cover 2,000-3,000 acres a day, he said.

“We need to be able to cover 20,000 to 30,000 acres in a day,” Blair said.

He also said the industry could benefit from UAVs that apply herbicides and from sensors that could detect plant diseases in early stages.

Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Celia Gould told attendees the agtech movement would be driven by industry and not the state.

“What agritech comes to mean in Idaho is really up to you,” she said. “And it’s about doing this the Ida-

ho way — organically and from the ground up. Not from the top down. This is not about the state rolling out an initiative.”

Sayer told ag industry leaders the state’s technology sector genuinely wants to help them tackle margin-changing issues.

“They are very, very interested in having that conversation with every one of you on the ag side,” he said. “This is about making your lives more profitable.”

The next step is up to the two sectors, he said, but the state wants to help in any way it can.

“We’re going to continue to nudge this,” he said. “We think we’re on to something.”



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Leaders of Idaho’s technology sector participate in a panel discussion June 16 during the state’s first-ever AgriTech Summit. The event brought together leaders of Idaho’s farming and hi-tech sectors.

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