

More visiting buyers check out Northwest wheat, grain commission says

Organization maintains contact with overseas customers

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

SPOKANE — Increased interest in Northwest grain has boosted the number of trade delegations visiting the Washington Grain Commission in recent years, the agency's CEO says.

Several years ago, one to three U.S. Wheat Associates-organized trade teams would pass through the region, said grain commission CEO Glen Squires. But in the last two years, that number has increased to four to six, with additional independent buyer groups coming through on their own.

The commission recently hosted a team of Japanese millers and will host visits from representatives of South Korea, the Philippines and other groups this year.

The Northwest grain commissions work together to provide information to visitors, Squires said. The Washington commission shares information with Idaho's and Oregon's wheat commissions.

U.S. wheat is often more expensive than that of competing countries, but performs better in mills and bakeries, said Washington commissioner Dana Herron.

"Agriculture and sales of commodities are a relational business — you need to know who your customer is and make sure he's getting what he needs," Herron said. "It's about building relationships."

A Japanese trade team visited commissioner Brit Ausman's Asotin, Wash., farm last year. It's important for the commis-

sion to be involved with buyers, Ausman said.

"We can meet their needs and they can get a feel for where the product's coming from," he said. "We'll continue to work on that relationship so that there's trust in the high-quality product we're producing."

The commission also works to keep communications ongoing with customers. Commission representatives often travel at the request of buyers to address problems or provide information, Squires said. The commission recently participated in U.S. Wheat Associates seminars overseas, talking about breeding and quality in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines with wheat buyers.

Squires expects the upward trend in the number of visits to continue. Millers want to see things for themselves, he said.

"They hear about stuff in the media, so they want to see firsthand," he said. "They want to see a barge being loaded or learn about the river system."

Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand top the grain commission's wish-list for future trade team visits, Squires said.

The commission is setting up a tour of Indonesian millers, Squires said. A team from Indonesia previously visited the Wheat Marketing Center in Portland, but this would be their first visit to the countryside, he said. That tour would likely occur next year.

Thailand is a key customer and Vietnam is an emerging market for wheat. They've visited in the past, but not recently. The commission is also in conversations with millers from Latin America and South America, Squires said.

"How can we help facilitate trade and exports there?" he said. "A lot of times, it's when they come and learn about what we have and get familiar with the system."

Humidity, heat can bring 'summer slump' to alfalfa

By **WILL KOENIG**
For the Capital Press

BUCKEYE, Ariz. — Arizona's heat and ample irrigation supplies create perfect conditions for growing alfalfa, but those factors can converge in a troublesome productivity slowdown known as "summer slump."

The problem of slow growth primarily surfaces from mid-July to mid-August, during the peak of Arizona's monsoon season, according to Mike Ottman, an extension agronomist with the University of Arizona School of Plant Sciences. The combination of high temperatures and high humidity from heavy downpours is believed to be the culprit.

"Particularly in August ... the plants just look sick," Ottman said. "They're short. They're pale. They don't grow as much."

While the alfalfa crops don't die because of summer slump, productivity declines as the plant struggles, an important issue for a state with about a quarter of its arable land planted to the forage crop, Maricopa County Extension agent Ayman Mostafa said. Arizona claims some of the highest average alfalfa yields in the world, as much as 8 tons an acre.

"This time of year we start to see it," said Perry Rayner, a fourth-generation Arizona farmer at A Tumbling T Ranches. Despite experimenting with different trials and products, summer slump has been difficult to prevent. "Nothing seems to affect it much."

Alfalfa and other plants function much like evaporative coolers, giving up mois-



Will Koenig/For the Capital Press

Mike Ottman, University of Arizona Extension agronomist, talks about moisture levels in alfalfa on July 8 at a field day near Buckeye, Ariz.

Information

To read more on summer slump in alfalfa, go to cals.arizona.edu/pubs/crops/az1611.pdf

ture to manage heat, Ottman said. And, like swamp coolers, they function more efficiently in dry conditions, even in the high temperatures Arizona experiences in May and June. But the increase in humidity brought by the monsoons forces alfalfa to expend more energy, pulling carbohydrates from its carrot-like taproot to maintain respiration instead of growing. This leads to less stored sugar for the plant to use to regrow after a cutting.

Any form of stress on alfalfa can contribute to summer slump, Ottman said, in-

cluding insect pressure and skipping an application of fertilizer or irrigation. But spacing between cuttings is one of the biggest factors that farmers can directly control. Longer cycles, especially waiting until the alfalfa blooms, allow for more robust alfalfa stands.

Jason Rovey, who took over operation of his family's farm two seasons ago and partners with the University of Arizona on research trials, said that summer slump isn't a significant problem in his fields, but that may be because of his fields' relatively high elevation of 1,000 feet above sea level.

"It starts to slow down in July and August, but yields haven't been hit too bad," Rovey said.

In a presentation at a University of Arizona field day at his farm near Buckeye on July 8, he said he spaces cuttings anywhere from 27 to 42 days apart, depending on what is best for the alfalfa.

"I don't want to cut on a schedule," Rovey said, as he described how he monitors heat units and crop conditions to decide when to start a cutting.

According to research by Ottman and Mostafa, cutting at full bloom allows the root to replenish carbohydrate reserves, reducing the effects of summer slump and improving yield in the fall. More information on summer slump is available through University of Arizona Cooperative Extension offices.

Alabama professor studies bumblebee evolution

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. (AP) — A University of Alabama biologist is part of a national team of researchers examining the adaptive qualities of bumblebees across multiple habitat types.

Jeff Lozier and his collaborators from the University of Wyoming and Utah State University is spending a \$1 million National Science Foundation award to study the genetics of differing bee species.

Lozier told the Tuscaloosa News that the team is trying to determine links between the species differing genetic makeup and their habitats. Put another way: How quickly and how well do the bees adjust to their changing circumstances?

The study focuses on two species that are abundant in California, Oregon and Washington across multiple elevations and habitats.

The team is also interested in how much the species have shared genes through interbreeding.

Lozier explained that the project grew out of more general assessment of bumblebee species. "The goal is to really get at some of these patterns that were hinted at previously," he said.

Data about the bees' adaptation and mating could help scientists understand how the species and other pollinators handle changing environments. Pollinators are vital to the health of their ecosystems because of the direct roles they play in plant life, which, in turn, affects humans' supply of food and oxygen.

"It's important to know something about how these things are adapted to the environment," Lozier said.

The research team will publish their results, but Lozier said he hopes their findings form the basis for "spin-off projects down the road."

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