CRP grazing extended for fire, drought victims

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Black Angus cattle graze pasture they normally wouldn't use until winter at Haeberle Ranch between Okanogan and Conconully, Wash., Aug. 31. Burned range in background. Ranchers throughout Eastern Washington are coping with loss of grazing grounds because of wildfires.

SPOKANE, Wash. — Ranchers in Eastern Washington who have lost grazing ground to drought or wildfire will be able to graze Conservation Reserve Program land through Dec. 15, says Judith Olson, state director of the USDA Farm Service Agency in Spokane.

That's welcome news and will help meet the short-term needs of hundreds of ranchers throughout Eastern Washington dealing with grazing losses because of wildfires, said Jack Field, executive vice president of the Washington Cattlemen's Association in Ellensburg.

CRP land is environmentally sensitive land the USDA pays farmers not to farm. There are 1,251,073 acres of CRP land in Eastern Washington and FSA is allowing grazing with no reduction in government payments to landowners, Olson said.

Grazing may not be practical on the entire acreage because of distance, lack of fencing and lack of water, she said.

CRP grazing was recently approved for drought victims. Wildfire victims need to get county FSA approval of National Resources Conservation Service grazing plans to use CRP lands, but that can be done quickly, Olson said

Emergency grazing of CRP land had been approved only through the end of the federal fiscal year, Sept. 30. The Cattlemen's Association and Farm Bureau officials urged an extension to Dec. 15.

"We have been working on this but it was contingent upon weather conditions and approval from the national office," Olson said.

Field said the extension was the most crucial thing that can be done for producers right now. Hundreds of ranchers in the northcentral, northeastern, southeastern and Mt. Adams area of the state have lost private and government allotment fall and spring grazing grounds to fires, he said. They are using winter ranges and hay early to get by and looking for short-term options for the fall, he said.

CRP can be a big help but doesn't always work because ranchers have to truck their cattle to the site and often have to haul water, put up temporary electric fences and run back and forth from their homes to tend cattle, he said.

"Each producer has to decide if it can work for them," Field said. "I've rented pasture 200 miles away and it's very difficult."

FSA has a cost-sharing program for hauling water to sites, he said.

CRP land is not available for grazing in the spring through Aug. 1 because of bird nesting, he said.

Okanogan County was disproportionately hit by the large Okanogan, Tunk Block and North Star fires, Field said.

Those fires total 518,540 acres out of more than 1 million acres burned in the state, according to fire officials. A lot of that land included grazing allotments.

It's difficult to assess grazing needs because ranchers won't fully know how many cows they've lost in fires until fall roundups, Field said.

Jon Wyss, president of the Okanogan County Farm Bureau, estimated 1,250 head of cattle are unaccounted for in the county. He said another 2,000 to 3,000 head probably will be sold off as ranchers decide they can't feed them. All of that is about 43 percent of the 11,000 head in the county, he said.

A total of 980 cattle died in the Carlton fire in the county last year, he said.

Mother cows usually calve for seven years, so this year's loss multiplied by seven years of production could be a $50 million loss in sales value, Wyss said.

Fewer cattle were sold off after the Carlton fire last year because more grazing land was available, much of what is burned now, he said.

"It's unfortunate to be selling off herds because you can't rebuild them overnight," Field said. "In some situations generations of genetics and breeding are lost. Those cattle knew those ranges. It's difficult to put other cattle out there on range they were not raised on."

Herd reductions are bad for the Northwest beef industry, he said.

Wyss, who chairs a local fire recovery group, said 95 homes, 94 cabins, 20 shops and garages and 89 outbuildings burned in this year's Okanogan fire. That doesn't include Tunk Block and North Star and compares with 312 homes, plus outbuildings burned last year in the Carlton fire.

Wyss estimated 1,000 miles of fencing burned this year in the county that will cost an average of $8,000 per mile to replace.

More sheep killed by Mount Emily wolves

ODFW tallies five incidents this year

By GEORGE PLAVEN
EO Media Group

The Mount Emily wolf pack of northeast Oregon continues to prey on sheep in the Blue Mountains between Umatilla and Union counties, with five confirmed attacks so far in 2015 — all against the same producer.

The last three incidents happened less than two weeks apart on Aug. 15, 24 and 27 in the Umatilla National Forest near Ninemile Ridge. Michelle Dennehy, spokeswoman with the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, said they have tried and will continue to use non-lethal deterrents such as guard dogs and increased human presence to keep wolves away from the area.

Oregon lists wolves as endangered species east of highways 395, 78 and 95, though current management rules would allow ODFW to consider lethal control of the Mount Emily pack if the rancher files a formal request. That hasn't happened yet, Dennehy said.

Program coordinator Russ Morgan previously said their goal is not to kill wolves, but to find a way to stop livestock predation. The focus is on those non-lethal deterrents, he said.

A wolf conflict deterrence plan is filed for the Mount Emily pack, which includes tips for hazing wolves away from sheep pastures. ODFW recommends herders should be stationed near the sheep and active at night when predation is likely to occur. Fladry fencing, guard dogs and alarm boxes can also be effective tools, according to the department.

There are at least 77 known wolves documented in Oregon, most in the northeast corner of the state.

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission will look at a proposal to remove wolves from the Endangered Species List in Eastern Oregon during meetings in October and November. Wolves in Western Oregon are listed by the federal government as endangered.

Expert offers options for keeping slugs at bay

By MITCH LIES
For the Capital Press

Mitch Lies/For the Capital Press

Penn State University entomologist John Tooker, speaking at an Oregon State University Extension meeting Sept. 10 in Salem, provided Oregon growers with insight into slug control tactics that Pennsylvania growers have incorporated to protect their crops from slug damage in recent years.

SALEM — Penn State University entomologist John Tooker didn't provide Oregon growers with any silver bullet solutions to slug control during his visit to the Willamette Valley last week.

But Tooker shared strategies Pennsylvania growers have used to lower slug pressure and encouraged Oregon growers to consider implementing some of them.

"I would ask you to think about ways to incorporate some of these ideas, recognizing our annual cropping system in Pennsylvania is different than what you have here," he said at an Oregon State University Extension meeting in Salem on Sept. 10. "By implementing these ideas, a couple of growers who have fully embraced them have made their slug populations go away."

Slugs are by most accounts among the worst pests in Oregon grass seed production, if not the worst. They accounted for nearly $100 million in damage to the $500 million crop in recent years. The mollusk also is responsible for substantial crop loss in several other field and row crops.

Tooker, who has become a leading expert in slug control in recent years, said growers and researchers in Pennsylvania have found that use of cover crops and predator beetles, in the absence of insecticidal seed treatments, can be a successful formula for keeping slugs at bay.

To start with, he said, slugs prefer certain cover crops over cash crops — a preference growers can use to their advantage.

"If you give them a choice between a rye plant and a corn plant, they will choose the rye every time," he said.

Complementing the direct benefit of keeping slugs off grower's primary crop, rye and crimson clover plants serve as hosts for beneficial insects that feed on slugs.

"The rye distracts the slugs, allowing them to feed on something they like better than the cash crop, and it improves the ground beetle population," he said. "Those two things together are taking the pressure off the cash crop, letting it get out of the ground and grow."

Some growers in Pennsylvania have even started planting cash crops directly into a standing green cover crop, Tooker said. They follow that with a treatment of glyphosate, which kills off the cover crop, but while the cover crop is dying, it is still palatable to the slugs and still fostering beneficial insect populations, he said.

OSP asks for information about wolf killings

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

On-line: The Sled Springs pair
http://dfw.state.or.us/Wolves/AKWA/sled_springs.asp

Wolf pups from Northeastern Oregon's Sled Springs pair haven't been seen since their parents were found dead within 50 yards of each other during the week of Aug. 24th, an Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife spokeswoman said.

Oregon State Police have been investigating the killings since the wolves were found dead, but didn't make the case public until Sept. 16.

"We didn't want to tip our hand," spokesman Lt. Bill Fugate said.

Wolves are protected under state and federal endangered species laws, and killing them is a crime. OSP is asking anyone with information about the case to contact Senior Trooper Kreg Coggins at 541-426-3049, or call the agency's TIP line at 1-800-452-788, or email TIP@state.or.us.

Fugate said OSP won't disclose the cause of death at this time.

The investigation began when a tracking collar worn by OR-21, a female, emitted a mortality signal, ODFW spokeswoman Michelle Dennehy said. The female wolf and her mate were found dead.

The pair had pups that would be about five months old and weaned at this point, Dennehy said. The pups hadn't been seen as of Wednesday morning, but wolves are secretive and the pups should be free-ranging by now, she said. It's unclear how many pups the pair had.

Research opens door to new types of insecticides

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

Scott

Experimental insecticides that turn off vital genes in specific pests through a process called RNA interference are more durable and long-lasting than previously suspected, according to new research at Cornell University.

Cornell entomology professor Jeff Scott and his laboratory manager, Keri San Miguel, believe RNAi technology could revolutionize the crop protection industry due to its ability to avoid collateral damage among beneficial insects that offer biological control of pests.

"It has tremendous potential in pest control since you might be able to make it very specific for a pest species," Scott said, noting growers often encounter new insects of concern after trying a different insecticide that disrupts a natural balance with beneficial insects.

Their findings were recently published in Pest Management Science.

RNA is essentially a copy of a DNA strand created as a messenger, alerting cells which proteins should be manufactured. RNA interference introduces genes to destroy targeted RNA messengers.

Scott and Miguel initially planned to work with an expert in sun screen residues to develop a protectant to enhance their treatment's durability. In nature, Scott explained the DNA of a decomposing bird, for example, is easy to extract, while the RNA is usually degraded.

But they discovered protecting the RNA was unnecessary. While RNA messengers used by organisms are single-stranded, Scott and Miguel utilized double-stranded RNA, which, like DNA, seems to withstand the elements.

In their greenhouse trials, RNA-based insecticide was effective against Colorado potato beetle for 28 days — and likely would have continued working had the experiment not been disrupted by another pest entering the greenhouse. The RNA-based product worked even after treated foliage was swirled in water, simulating rainfall.

Though ultraviolet light quickly degraded RNA on a glass slide, the treatment was unharmed on foliage — potentially because it was absorbed into cells or shaded by leaf hairs.

Scott is confident the results would stand up in field trials. He said the approach is highly effective against beetles with larvae that feed on plants, but some pest species have enzymes in their guts that destroy the double-stranded RNA before it can enter their cells. More work is also needed to make RNAi effective on aphids, he said.

Major chemical companies have also taken notice of the technology. In 2012, Syngenta and Devgen entered into a six-year agreement to jointly research RNAi technology.

Monsanto researcher Greg Heck said the Cornell results are consistent with findings of his company's ongoing double-stranded RNA research.

Heck said Monsanto has a transgenic corn product using RNAi to control corn rootworm under regulatory review by agencies around the world. He believes the product offer a new mode of action that would forestall development of chemical resistance. Monsanto is also developing a topical product line utilizing double-stranded RNA called BioDirect.