

Farm groups flood DOE with comments on manure lagoon regs

Environmentalists urge Ecology Dept. to hold firm

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Washington Department of Ecology compiled comments totaling 5,000 pages on its proposal to regulate manure lagoons, a policy that agriculture groups and individual farmers warn will bankrupt some producers, particularly small dairies. Environmentalists largely praised DOE for increasing the number of producers who would need permits to confine any number of livestock for at least 45 days over 12 months. Only 10 producers have

permits now for concentrated feeding operations. Under DOE’s preliminary proposal, all producers with unlined lagoons would need a permit. Permit holders wouldn’t necessarily have to line lagoons, but would be required to take all “known, available and reasonable methods” to prevent manure from polluting groundwater, surface water or row crops. Hundreds of producers would be saddled with an “unattainable requirement that will leave permit holders wide open to litigation,” wrote Jack Field, Washington Cattlemen’s Association executive vice president, in one of 91 letters submitted by 168 groups and individuals. DOE said the policy it floated in August was a pre-

lude to a final proposal due out early next year. DOE officials acknowledged the proposal needs revisions, including ways to reduce the burden on smaller farms. “We expected to have some things to work on,” said Jon Jennings, an administrator in DOE’s water quality program. “It was a rough statement of our thinking.” The Western Environmental Law Center, writing on behalf of 13 organizations, urged Ecology to stand up to agriculture. “You should not be bullied into abdicating your statutory responsibilities to protect water quality and public water,” the law firm wrote. The Washington State Board of Health supported DOE’s assumption that

all unlined lagoons pollute groundwater and thus should be regulated similar to wastewater discharged from a manufacturer’s pipe. “We feel this is a step in the right direction to protect human health for those that reside near CAFOs,” the board’s chairman, Keith Grellner, wrote. The overwhelming number of comments came from farmers and agriculture groups. Many said DOE’s blanket indictment of unlined lagoons was scientifically unsupported and that the proposed rule would lead to loss of farmland. Fewer dairies will mean less wildlife habitat, fewer sources of organic fertilizer and more urban sprawl, according to the Washington State Dairy Federation.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press
Dairy cows graze in Western Washington. Agriculture groups and individual farmers warn that a state Department of Ecology proposal to regulate manure lagoons will drive small dairies out of business.

“We are not being irrationally alarmist,” the federation wrote. “Land conversion out of dairy is a very real option that producers are already pondering.”



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press
Rick Miller, professor emeritus of range ecology and management at Oregon State University, points out plant species to other participants on a range tour of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management Jarbidge Field Office in south-central Idaho on Oct. 23. The tour was part of the Rangeland Fall Forum organized by the University of Idaho Rangeland Center.

Rancher: Living with wildfire is about balance

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

TWIN FALLS COUNTY, Idaho—Third-generation sheep and cattle rancher Mike Guerry knows first-hand the challenges of wildfire on south-central Idaho’s high desert rangelands. Between 2004 and 2012, his public lands grazing allotments were hit with five major wildfires, with the largest burning 660,000 acres, and he’s lost his winter grazing permit for seven of the last 12 years. Wildfires “created some immense challenges and some changes” in how he manages his operation, he told those attending last week’s Rangeland Fall Forum, organized by the University of Idaho Rangeland Center. Fire has always been a major component in maintaining sage brush steppe in the Jarbidge—a vast area of public land managed by Bureau of Land Management. But historically, fires were smaller and provided a landscape mosaic that helped guard against devastating fires, he said. A large fire in the area in the 1970s was 3,000 to 10,000 acres but they grew to 200,000

to 660,000 acres by the 2000s, he said. Ranchers and land managers recognize the benefits of fire, including prescribed burns, to prevent large wildfires and restore rangeland health, he said. “Life and living with fires is all about balance. We’re trying to make a living and restore that balance,” he said. The balance is a three-legged stool comprised of rangeland utilization and manipulation and fire suppression, he said. **Managing fuel loads**

Utilization is grazing the land to manage fuel loads, an effective tool that has been hindered by wildfire, environmental lawsuits, and federal land-management policy, he said. Fire takes grazing off the list due to federal policy that requires rest periods that don’t necessarily consider local rangelands, he said. That was the case when Guerry lost a winter grazing permit due to fire and the range burned out a second time before he ever got back on, he said. “We need to come up with rules to let people back on after

one season,” he said. In another case, a judge’s ruling in a lawsuit brought by environmentalists limited grazing for two months in the spring. “Fire went through and burned it all off, and there was nothing mosaic about it,” he said. But the landscape and ranchers have benefited by temporary non-renewal permits issued by BLM to address particular conditions, he said. **Resistance and resilience**

Manipulating the landscape to restore native plant species and create a mosaic of fire stops is another part of the balance, and BLM has been a strong partner, Guerry said. “We’ve been very creative in the Jarbidge because we’ve had to be. We know in this resource area, as productive as it is, we’re going to have fires,” he said. Mowing, harrowing, planting green strips, putting in brown strips and burning fence lines all have a place. But they all have issues as well, he said. “You’ve got to weigh the pros with the cons and pick areas that are most likely to be a

problem,” he said. **Fire reduction**

As for suppression, firefighting resources are the biggest issue, but land-management policy has also proved challenging. Agencies’ inability to most effectively fight large fires due to environmental restrictions has caused frustration for the agencies and ranchers, he said. It was a matter of not being allowed to disturb a little sage brush only to see a lot more burn. But those handcuffs have been removed, taking away a lot of the frustration, he said. There’s also been an issue of ranchers not being allowed to participate in firefighting activities once the agencies arrive, due to liability, he said. The creation of rangeland fire protection associations—which provide training, funding, some equipment and the legal status to assist firefighters—has gone a long way in the Jarbidge to remedy that, he said. RFPAs also provide additional resources in manpower, equipment, water storage, landscape knowledge and on-the-scene communication, he said.

Idaho’s warm fall a mixed blessing

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

Eastern Idaho growers say an unseasonably warm fall has been a mixed blessing, expediting fall grain development, harvest time and field work but posing challenges with diseases, insects and storage conditions. University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall said the fungal pathogen stripe rust has been confirmed in wheat in Blackfoot, American Falls, Preston, Soda Springs and Arbon Valley. Marshall said the warm fall has resulted in an abundance of volunteer wheat, which is harboring stripe rust. She said infections have also been found in some soft white winter wheat fields, planted in susceptible varieties.

“I would recommend spraying susceptible varieties in the spring,” Marshall said. She also advises growers to plow under or chemically control volunteer grain. Marshall said the warm fall has also contributed to higher aphid pressure and the likelihood of barley yellow dwarf disease returning as a problem in winter grains next season. Idaho Wheat Commission Executive Director Blaine Jacobson worries warmer falls are becoming a trend in Idaho. “In all of the crops and even forestry management, we’re seeing diseases migrate north—diseases that generally occur in warmer weather,” Jacobson said. “Stripe rust we’re seeing more and more, whereas 10 years ago, it was not as prevalent.” According to the National Weather Service, the average date of the first 28-degree low temperature throughout the Eastern Snake Plain ranges from Sept. 30 through Oct. 5. The first killing frost has been weeks late this season. In Pocatello, for example, National Weather Service meteorolo-

gist Greg Kaiser said the first temperature below 28 degrees didn’t arrive until Oct. 28, and it didn’t produce a killing frost. Kaiser said Pocatello was on pace for its third warmest October, tying or setting record highs at 83 degrees on Oct. 10, 79 degrees on Oct. 15 and 81 degrees on Oct. 16. Kaiser attributes the warmth to high pressure in the upper atmosphere pushing cold air north. He said colder temperatures should arrive Nov. 2. Vance Ward, a dryland farmer in southeast Idaho’s Arbon Valley, said thanks to the warm fall, his winter grain is “coming up and looking good.” “It’s been a long time since I remember (the fall weather) doing this,” Ward said. Idaho Falls grower Marc Thiel said some volunteer fields in his area have already produced heads, and he’s had the unexpected opportunity to graze one of his volunteer barley fields. Warm temperatures, however, have made it more challenging for Thiel to cool spuds headed into storage. Thiel fears there may be more problems this season with spuds breaking down in his cellars, as a result. “After you dig spuds, you always rely on those 30-degree nights and cooler to get those cooled down,” Thiel said. “There were some that were dug pretty warm.” Aberdeen spud farmer Ritchey Toevs has had to change his storage methods this season due to the heat. Typically, the fans in his potato cellars automatically activate when outside temperatures drop below 55 degrees. This fall, Toevs has utilized temperature sensors within potato piles, increasing the number of hours his fans are running. Toevs said storage rot is “definitely a concern” this season.

Washington State bread lab plants wheat, barley at governor’s mansion

Farmers, researchers look to raise awareness of crops

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Researchers from the Washington State University bread laboratory have planted wheat and barley at the governor’s mansion in Olympia. They planted a new WSU bread wheat variety, Skagit-09, and two Oregon State University food barley varieties in plots at the mansion. The lab wants to release the wheat variety this fall. It is bred specifically for the west side of the state, said director Stephen Jones. The lab is in Mount Vernon, Wash. Roughly 1 percent of the wheat grown in Washington comes from the west side, Jones said. The majority of

Washington’s wheat is exported to other countries, but the new variety will be used only by bakers in the region. “It’s important as a rotational crop,” Jones said. “Our goal is to add some value to that part of the rotation. Anything we can do to get some value to the farmers, that’s our job.” Brigid Meints, a doctoral student at the lab, is breeding food barleys for the region. The barley plot includes a strip of the OSU variety Streaker and a mixture of Streaker and a new variety, Buck. She said she wants to increase awareness of barley as a food crop. “These are the first winter barleys that are hull-less, and so you can eat them without any additional processing steps,” Meints said. “Most people don’t eat barley as a food product, (but) they obviously will drink it often in their beer or whiskey.” Streaker and Buck are

available to farmers, Meints said. She is also planting several experimental lines, and is working on creating new lines adapted to Western Washington. “Just because there hasn’t been much research done on food barley,” she said. The plots are 3 feet-by-15 feet. They’re the first wheat plots planted at the governor’s mansion, Jones said. “There has been wheat in the White House garden, but I’m not aware that it’s been here,” he said. Does it do anything for the industry? “It doesn’t hurt,” Jones said. “Just to have people talking about wheat is great, wherever it is.” Representatives from the lab and Washington Association of Wheat Growers were at the mansion Oct. 27 for a planting and baking demonstration.



Courtesy photo
From left, Washington State University Bread Lab resident baker Jonathan Bethony in apron, Washington First Lady Trudi Inslee, Washington Association of Wheat Growers past president Nicole Berg, WAWG President Larry Cochran and bread lab director Stephen Jones mark the planting of wheat and barley plots at the governor’s mansion Oct. 28 with a baking demonstration.