

WAFLA seeks help on H-2A delays

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Northwest farm labor association, WAFLA, is asking its members to contact their congressional representatives and the secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor to ask the department to resolve its delays in approving H-2A foreign guestworkers.

In the past month, H-2A applications across the nation have been delayed by DOL, which cites computer problems and an increased workload, according to a WAFLA email alert to its members.

DOL's labor certification

to allow the hiring of foreign workers is the first step in the program and federal law mandates certificates be issued at least 30 days prior to the date workers are needed in order to allow for other parts of visa procurement, WAFLA said.

"WAFLA has documented many cases where labor certifications were issued several weeks late, virtually guaranteeing that workers will not arrive on the date they are needed," WAFLA said.

WAFLA is working with members of Congress and DOL to get applications processed quicker.

There is a "massive labor

shortage" and DOL delays may result in thousands of farmworkers arriving late for spring contracts in Washington and nationwide, WAFLA said. It could be financially devastating to farms and crops, WAFLA said.

WAFLA began experiencing the delay in early February, Dan Fazio, WAFLA director, said Feb. 18 at the organization's annual meeting in Ellensburg. At that time, he said, about a half-dozen applications for a total of about 1,000 workers, mainly for Washington tree fruit growers, had been delayed.

Washington growers have increasingly turned to the

H-2A program to solve its labor needs in recent years. Usage has grown from 814 workers in 2006 to 11,844 in 2015. Fazio has said the number could be 15,000 this year. Growers have to provide housing and transportation to and from the U.S. for the workers, most of whom come from Mexico.

The workers must be paid at least \$12.69 per hour in Washington and Oregon. Many make more than that when paid piece rate for picking fruit. WAFLA provided about 67 percent of the H-2A workers in Washington last season through contracts with growers.



Courtesy of Amit Dhingra, WSU

Amit Dhingra, Washington State University genomicist, is seen with a Golden Delicious apple. His company, Phytelligence, is opening facilities in Seattle and Portland.

Water Board partners with irrigators for recharge

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The Idaho Water Resource Board is investing in existing irrigation systems to replenish the declining Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer with an ultimate goal of recharging 250,000 acre-feet of water per year.

The Water Board has known about productive recharge sites for years but hasn't had the money to build or improve infrastructure to accomplish the recharge goal, Vince Alberdi, Water Board member and former long-time manager of the Twin Falls Canal Co., said.

That changed in 2014 when the state Legislature approved an annual allocation of \$5 million from the state's cigarette tax to the Water Board for statewide aquifer stabilization.

Two years ago, the Water Board started developing contracts with irrigation districts and canal companies to compensate them for recharge and get projects moving, starting with the "low-hanging fruit" — those that are easiest to bring on-line, he said.

One such project is taking place near Shoshone, where the Water Board is partnering with American Falls Reservoir District No. 2 to convey water in the Milner-Gooding Canal to an existing recharge basin. The site was used many years ago by the Lower Snake River Aquifer Recharge District in Hagerman to replenish flows at Thousand Springs.

The recharge proved effective, but the district didn't have money to continue, Alberdi said.

The Water Board calls the Milner-Gooding Canal the "workhorse" of all the recharge sites in the ESPA area, recharging 42,000 acre-feet



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Lynne Harmon, manager of American Falls Reservoir District No. 2, stands beside a diversion gate that will allow water recharge of the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer at a site north of Shoshone on March 9.

of the total 58,000 acre-feet recharged thus far this non-irrigation season.

But part of that system was in need of repair. Its 15,000-foot concrete channel that carries irrigation water from Milner Dam across the lava flow between the Little Wood and the Big Wood rivers was deteriorating, said Lynn Harmon, manager of American Falls Reservoir District No. 2.

This winter, the concrete flume is being stripped and repaired and coated to seal cracks and waterproof the walls to guard against the effects of recharge water freezing and thawing in the winter, he said.

The porous lava rock recharge basin — which sits about midway on the flume

— is a good recharge site due to its isolation, retention capabilities and direct effect on the springs at Hagerman. The site has the potential to recharge 350 cubic feet per second, he said.

Total cost of the cost-share project, which is nearing completion, is estimated at \$1.32 million, with the Water Board contributing \$700,000.

In addition, the Milepost 31 recharge site north of Eden and 36 miles upstream on the same canal is being expanded. By next winter, the Water Board could be recharging 550 cubic feet per second from the Milner-Gooding Canal, more than doubling the canal's current recharge capacity.

Other Water Board re-

charge projects on the ESPA include infrastructure improvements on the North Side Canal, Twin Falls Canal, Greater Feeder Canal, Egin Lakes and Jenson Grove.

Without the cooperation of irrigation districts and canal companies and their willingness to allow the Water Board to use their facilities, it would take years to get recharge infrastructure in place, Alberdi said.

And it would take hundreds of millions of dollars, said Water Board Chairman Roger Chase.

Funding from the cigarette tax is due to sunset in 2019, but two bills to continue funding aquifer recharge statewide are now being discussed in the Legislature, Alberdi said.

Agriculture biotech company expands to Seattle, Portland

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

SEATTLE — Phytelligence, an agricultural biotechnology company with Washington State University roots, has established its headquarters in Seattle and facilities in Portland for the advanced propagation of food crops.

The company was founded in 2012 by Amit Dhingra, associate professor of horticultural genomics and biotechnology at WSU. He developed micropropagation protocols, techniques and software to produce rootstocks, fruit trees and grapevines faster and cheaper than traditional nursery methods and ensure their correct identity through high-resolution genetic fingerprinting.

Disease screening, plant repository services, securing of intellectual property and the ability to co-develop new varieties of food crops also is provided.

The company also has biological and compound solutions, including one that keeps pears from aging after they are sliced and packaged.

In 2012 and 2013, mix-ups in materials for propagation of new disease-resistant apple rootstock at Washington tree fruit nurseries led to the loss of millions of dollars, Dhingra has said. Phytelligence can prevent that by testing the DNA of each plant, he said.

The goal is not to replace Northwest fruit tree nurseries but help them become more efficient, cost effective and globally competitive, said Ashley Ennis, Phytelligence director of marketing.

C&O Nursery, Wenatchee;

Van Well Nursery, East Wenatchee; Willow Drive Nursery, Ephrata; TRECO, Woodburn, Ore.; and ProTree Nursery, Brentwood, Calif., all have invested in Phytelligence. They remain supportive, Ennis said.

Dhingra is the company's controlling partner, handles scientific developments and operates its Pullman laboratory, she said.

The company has expanded into production of pear and cherry trees, peaches, almonds, hops and blueberry, raspberry and strawberry plants, she said.

The Seattle facilities provide 118,000 square feet of greenhouse and 85,000 square feet of outdoor storage to meet customer demand for 3 million to 6 million plants in each of the next two years.

More than 15,000 plantlets already arrive weekly from the company's tissue culture laboratory in Pullman. The Seattle facility has a state-of-the-art, high humidity growth and acclimation building to transition plants from the tissue culture gel composition to the sterile greenhouse potting environment.

In Portland, the company recently moved into the 12,000-square-foot PacTrust facility adjacent to the Oregon Business Park. It includes former facilities of Dow Agro-Sciences and will retain most of that company's researchers for studying production and use of plants for food, fuel, fiber and land reclamation. There is a tissue culture lab and plans to eventually grow up to 29 million plants annually.

Idaho ag industry mourns state's Mexico trade director

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho agriculture is mourning the death of Armando Orellana, who directed the state's Mexico trade office for 22 years.

Orellana, who died of a heart attack March 4 at the age of 64, presided over a significant increase in Idaho agricultural exports to Mexico.

Besides helping Idaho farmers and agribusinesses find and take advantage of opportunities in Mexico, Orellana was a friend to many people involved in the state's agricultural sector, industry leaders told Capital Press.

"Idaho agriculture lost a great friend," Idaho State Department of Agriculture Director Celia Gould said in an email. "He touched many lives over the years and the tragic loss of Armando will be felt throughout Idaho."

Orellana worked closely with Idaho Farm Bureau Federation leaders and was a big reason Idaho ag exports to Mexico soared in recent years, said IFBF Director of Commodities Dennis Brower.

Mexico last year surpassed Canada to become the top foreign market for Idaho ag exports, and \$191 million worth of the state's farm products were sold there in 2015.

In recent years, "literally

every (ag product from Idaho) that went into Mexico, Armando had something to do with it," Brower said.

Idaho Bean Commission board member Don Tolmie said Orellana was a big reason the state's dry bean industry has been able to make major inroads into Mexico.

"Armando represented the Idaho bean industry there for at least 20 years," said Tolmie, production manager for Treasure Valley Seed Co. "Several Idaho bean companies benefited greatly from Armando's representation."

Tolmie said Orellana's death "was a shock to everybody who knew Armando and it's a great loss to the Idaho ag industry."

Before taking over as director of Idaho's Mexico trade office in Guadalajara in 1994, Orellana, who had a master's degree in business administration, spent 18 years working for major agricultural firms in that nation.

"He was dedicated to serving our state and will be missed deeply," Gould said.

In an IFBF tribute to Orellana posted on YouTube, CEO Rick Keller said that "just about every bushel of grain in Mexico from Idaho would have his thumb print on it," as well "as every mustard seed sale we had, potato processing equipment (and) bean seed. ..."

Idaho grain growers brace for yellow dwarf problems

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

ABERDEEN, Idaho — Based on the volume and distribution of recent grower reports about barley yellow dwarf infections in winter wheat, University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall said it's clear the disease will be rampant again this season.

Last season, Southern and Eastern Idaho grain growers coped with the most widespread barley yellow dwarf outbreak they'd ever experienced. The virus is spread by aphids, causes yellowing of leaves and stunts plant roots.

Though an abnormally wet May helped plants grow out of their symptoms in 2015, many growers still experienced yield losses of up to 40 percent, Marshall said. Marshall fears the disease is at least as widespread as last year, and absent another break from Mother Nature, yield losses could be greater.

Coupled with slumping commodity prices, Marshall worries Idaho wheat and barley returns could suffer.

"It's going to be widespread again," Marshall said. "There are some growers who feel like it's going to be worse, but at this point, we can't tell."

Marshall said growers have brought half a dozen samples of infected plants to her office,



John O'Connell/Capital Press

University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall shows a sample of winter wheat brought in by a grower with symptoms of barley yellow dwarf virus. Marshall said the sample, found near American Falls, didn't have an insecticidal seed treatment, which is a recommendation for limiting damage, and she anticipates widespread infections this season.

and she's been flooded with calls, confirming the disease is present in fields from the Idaho and Utah border, north to Blackfoot and west to Twin Falls County. Even before the first snow of winter fell, Marshall said barley yellow dwarf cases were confirmed in fall wheat fields near Seagull Bay of the American Falls Reservoir, Fort Hall and in the Arbon and Rockland valleys. She said growers have found infected plants throughout fields, often with the heaviest infections occurring along field edges.

"Barley yellow dwarf is going to be pretty visible here in the next several weeks," Marshall said.

to plant if they delayed.

This spring, she advises growers to control volunteers to eliminate potential sources of virus and aphids, and to plant spring grain as early as possible, allowing the plants to mature and be hardy when aphids arrive.

Marshall said UI has no good recommendations on resistant varieties but has been evaluating some potentially resistant Kansas State University varieties in research plots in Buhl, where UI is also evaluating the efficacy of insecticidal seed treatments and additional foliar sprays in the fall. She also advises growers to keep crops well watered and fertilized, as the virus robs plants of nutrients and moisture to replicate itself.

UI agronomist Xi Liang is leading greenhouse and field studies to evaluate how adding different levels of supplemental nitrogen in the spring may curb yield losses. She's also evaluating how sick plants absorb moisture.

"We'll collect roots at the end of the study to see if the roots are affected by barley yellow dwarf virus and damage (water) uptake from the soil profile," Liang said.

UI barley agronomist Chris Rogers is overseeing similar trials in barley, and plans to evaluate a new European variety, Wintmalt, for yellow dwarf tolerance.