

Beef, dairy groups question proposed organic rule

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

A new rule proposed by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service to amend organic livestock and poultry practices is raising concerns among conventional animal agriculture groups.

The rule, which adds provisions for animal welfare practices and living conditions, is based on recommendations by the National Organic Standards Board. It is meant to ensure consistent application of USDA organic regulations and maintain consumer confidence in organically labeled products, according to AMS.

But the rule would do much more than that, according to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. USDA is attempting to add an entirely new and unauthorized category to the National Organic Program, exceeding its statutory jurisdiction and con-



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Holstein cows rest at a Southwestern Idaho dairy in this file photo. Livestock groups question the propriety of new animal welfare rules aimed at organic farms.

gressional intent, said Colin Woodall, NCBA vice president of government affairs.

The most important point of NCBA's opposition is that the organic program is a marketing program. It isn't about animal health, welfare or even food safety, and USDA shouldn't be inserting animal welfare standards into a voluntary marketing program, he said.

The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 doesn't include welfare practices or living conditions. The clear intent of Congress in setting organic standards was to ensure that feed is organic and animals are raised without the use of synthetic chemicals, and that's where USDA should spend its time, he said.

The Organic Trade Association disagrees.

"Organic is much more than input substitution," said Nate Lewis, OTA farm policy director.

It is written into the organic law that USDA has the authority to promulgate rules regarding the care of livestock and poultry, he said.

The proposed rule is the result of 12 years of public comment and work by the organic standards board to clarify the organic requirement for access to outdoors, and the vast majority of organic producers and consumers support the rule, Lewis said.

National Milk Producers Federation also questions USDA's statutory authority, especially since some of the proposed practices lack an explanation of the well-being benefits, said Jamie Jonker, NMPF vice president of sustainability and scientific affairs, in his comments to USDA.

"A fundamental problem

with the proposed rule is that it appears more driven by economics and consumer perception rather than animal science and welfare," he said. Economic considerations are important and should be part of the rule-making process, but so-called "consumer confusion" about the meaning of organic should not drive rule-making associated with animal well-being, he said.

Consumer confusion was one of the reasons USDA proposed the new rule, but the agency should have invested in consumer education rather than adding more categories to the organic program, making it even more confusing, Woodall said.

USDA cites reports by the board as authority to support some of the proposed rule changes. However, those reports mostly contain basic information and do not cite scientific literature or provide scientific bases to support the

provisions, Jonker said.

Instead, the reports are largely based on public meetings. In some cases, the proposed standards are based on public perception of what is good animal welfare and reflect no consensus among experts in animal welfare and handling, he said.

"Although public meetings serve a useful purpose ... they do not absolve the USDA-AMS-NOP from developing regulatory requirements, particularly on topics such as animal welfare, based on the scientific literature," he said.

The proposed rule contains a lot of unjustified and unsubstantiated provisions that go beyond standard, approved, safe procedures, Woodall said.

The rule is based on agenda and perception more than anything else and vilifies conventional livestock, giving the false perception that only organic livestock is being treated well, he said.

Stripe rust pressure 'severe' in NW wheat, expert says

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Stripe rust pressure this year is "severe to extremely severe" in Pacific Northwest wheat, but most farmers have been able to control it by growing resistant varieties or by applying fungicides.

USDA Agricultural Research Service plant geneticist Xianming Chen blames the mild winter, which allowed the rust to survive and develop in winter wheat.

"Stripe rust developed very early and very quick," Chen said.

The fungus can cause more than a 60 percent yield loss in highly susceptible wheat varieties.

Applying fungicide has paid off for growers. Rust is generally under control in most commercial fields, Chen said.

"That is big spending for growers, but this year, it was worth it to do that," he said.

The fungus is occurring al-



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

USDA Agricultural Research Service plant geneticist Xianming Chen, right, looks over variety trials during a July 14 field day in St. John, Wash. Chen says the wheat fungus stripe rust is at a "severe to extremely severe" level in the Pacific Northwest.

most everywhere in the Pacific Northwest, even in dryland areas.

He hopes to see more farmers plant resistant varieties in the future. That would eliminate the need to spray fungicide, even in severe rust years.

Most wheat fields are now

past the point where a fungicide application would help. Rust typically dies by harvest, Chen said, as it cannot live long in dead leaf tissue.

Chen said later-planted spring wheat in higher elevations may still have active rust due to recent rain.

Some of the major fungicides cannot be used after the flowering stage, while others can be used up to 30 days before harvest. Growers should be sure to read the fungicide labels, Chen said.

Temperatures are not quite optimum for the wheat's high

temperature, adult plant resistance to stripe rust to kick in.

It's too early to tell the outlook for next season, he said.

"It depends on what the weather conditions are from now to the fall," Chen said. "If the coming winter is cold, then the rust will die more. If the coming winter is very mild like last winter, this rust will survive more."

Chen said roughly 36 percent of winter wheat varieties are resistant to stripe rust and 16 percent are moderately resistant. Eight percent are moderately susceptible and 24 percent are moderately susceptible. None are highly susceptible.

For spring wheat, roughly 12 percent of the varieties are resistant, 40 percent are moderately resistant, 11 percent are moderately resistant to moderately susceptible, 11 percent are moderately susceptible and 11 percent are susceptible.

Rain, temperatures increase falling number concerns

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Rain and temperature fluctuations are worrying some in the Pacific Northwest wheat industry about sprout damage that could reduce the price farmers receive for their crop.

If the weather clears up without additional storms, "then maybe it's not going to be that big a disaster," said Camille Steber, USDA ARS research plant molecular geneticist in Pullman, Wash.

The concern is greater for winter wheat than the spring crop.

Grain elevators use the Hagberg-Perten falling num-



Capital Press File

USDA Agricultural Research Service plant molecular geneticist Camille Steber stands in the laboratory where she tests for falling numbers in this 2014 photo. Steber said rains and fluctuating temperatures this year have put wheat farmers at risk of receiving less money because of sprout damage in their crop.

ber test to measure starch damage because of sprouting, according to Washington

State University. A low falling number indicates a high level of alpha amylase, an

enzyme that degrades starch and diminishes the quality of wheat products. Grain with a falling number below 300 typically receives a discount in the Pacific Northwest.

"If the wheat is green, the rain won't cause a low falling number problem," Steber said. "If it's turned completely yellow, then you have to start worrying about it. The longer it's been since it turned from green to yellow, the more likely it is that you're going to have a problem."

Susceptible wheat varieties include Bruehl, Jasper, AP Legacy and Xerpha. Resistant varieties include Puma, Skiles, Coda and Bobtail.

Rain when temperatures are in the 80s won't likely cause sprouting. But rain during cooler periods are a concern, Steber said.

Other areas have had wide temperature fluctuations that can induce late-maturity alpha amylase.

"There may be some farmers whose wheat didn't even get rained on who will be coming to us and telling us they had falling numbers

below 300," Steber said.

Blaine Jacobson, executive director of the Idaho Wheat Commission, said low falling numbers are a concern in the Lewiston, Idaho, region. Stripe rust is also impacting lower elevations of Nezperce County, according to the commission.

As harvest moved into higher elevations, falling number scores improved, Jacobson said.

"We're optimistic that as the harvest progresses and the footprint expands, that problem will take care of itself," he said. "But it is something we're watching carefully."

Steber isn't certain how widespread the problem could be.

"I'm hoping it's a limited problem this year," she said.

Steber recommends farmers harvest as quickly as they can to avoid any rains coming through their area.

Growers are likely to make more money if they avoid mixing wheat likely to have a falling number problem with wheat that probably won't, she said.

Delta growers closely follow WaterFix hearings

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Carolyn McCormack and her neighbors will be following the upcoming series of hearings on Gov. Jerry Brown's signature water project and how it will impact their farms.

She and her husband, fourth-generation farmer Jeff McCormack, grow pears in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta region.

Their orchard is in the path of Brown's proposed \$15.7 billion twin tunnels that would send Sacramento River water directly to Southern California farms and cities, bypassing the Delta.

"It's just going to uproot so many families that have been there so long," McCormack said as she helped customers at a farmers' market in Elk Grove, Calif., on July 23. "It's not going to benefit Northern California. It's just going to hurt everybody."

In the coming weeks the state Water Resources Control Board will have hearings on the tunnel project, dubbed California WaterFix.

The board was set to begin July 26 with discussion of the state Department of Water Resources request to add three new points of diversion for the project, which includes two, 40-foot-diameter pipes buried underground for 35 miles.

The opening three days of the hearing in the California Environmental Protection Agency Sacramento headquarters were expected to begin with policy statements from the state Natural Resources Agency and U.S. Department of the Interior followed by public comment, according to a news release.

Experts are expected to present hundreds of pages of evidence over the next several months as the board determines if the project would change water quality and flow in a way that harms other water users. The board will also consider whether the project would effectively initiate a new water right.

Another round of hearings, expected to begin in early 2017, will examine the project's impacts on fish and wildlife, recreation and other public trust issues, state officials said.

The proposed tunnels are a key agenda item for Brown, who has made a solution to many of the Delta's water quality woes a focus of his administration. The governor's fourth term runs through 2018.

Proponents, including farm groups in the parched San Joaquin Valley, say the project would ensure a more reliable water supply by sending more water to be sent south during wet periods without harming fish.

Opponents, including many Delta farmers, say the project would worsen the Delta's already dire environmental condition.

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