

Camelina, quinoa studied as alternative crops in E. Oregon

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Eastern Oregon researchers are looking at camelina and quinoa as possible alternative crops that might not necessarily make farmers a lot of money but could prove helpful during drought years or as a second crop.

Field trials for both crops have been conducted the past three seasons at Oregon State University's Malheur County research station.

The quinoa crop was harvested for the first time this year after three tries, said OSU Cropping Systems Extension Agent Bill Buhrig.

Buhrig said if temperatures are above 90 degrees when quinoa, a gluten-free



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Oregon State University researcher Bill Buhrig talks about camelina field trials at OSU's Malheur County research station. OSU trials are trying to determine whether camelina and quinoa can benefit area farmers as alternative crops.

grain alternative, is flowering, the pollen will be sterilized. That's a problem in the Treasure Valley area of East-

ern Oregon and Southwestern Idaho, where temperatures are routinely higher during the summer.

However, OSU researchers are looking at quinoa in this area as a "double crop," planted in the same year after crops such as wheat or peas are harvested, when temperatures are lower.

"The interest I'm hearing from growers for quinoa is as an alternative crop to help fill the cash flow in behind wheat ... and have it flower during the latter part of the summer when we don't have those heat units," Buhrig said.

The results of this year's camelina trial, which was planted in November and harvested in June, are not yet in. But the past two seasons, the oilseed crop has yielded about 1,500 pounds an acre without irrigation.

The crop received 5.79 and 4.17 inches of natural pre-

cipitation in 2015 and 2014, respectively. Camelina could provide an option during drought years, Buhrig said.

At about 25 cents a pound, the camelina crop would have fetched about \$375 an acre the past two seasons, Buhrig said, but fallowing ground is not cheap. Area farmers followed significant portions of farmland due to a lack of water in 2014 and 2015.

"You still have to maintain weeds, pay water and taxes and you're still making payments on equipment, but you're not getting anything back," Buhrig said. "For (camelina) to be a good idea, it doesn't have to be incredibly profitable; it just has to be a little bit profitable."

By comparison, onions, the area's main cash crop, will

bring a grower about \$4,000 per acre on average, said Nysa farmer Bruce Corn.

While camelina can't match that, "When you're in a drought, leaving a field fallow is a real struggle," said Corn, who's glad OSU is researching camelina and quinoa.

"As you do research, sometimes things will pan out in unexpected ways," he said.

As an example, he pointed to the field trials that Malheur County research station director Clint Shock did on drip irrigation in the 1990s.

"Commercially, it didn't seem feasible at that time but now we're headed toward 100 percent drip irrigation of onions in the valley," he said.

"If you don't explore it, you won't know what ... the potential might be."

WAFLA says 2016 wage survey better than last year's

Farm labor group says key issues unresolved

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Washington State Employment Security Department has done a good job engaging the industry in drafting an agricultural wage and prevailing practices survey but key issues about survey questions remain unresolved, says the farm labor association WAFLA.

ESD will send the voluntary survey to about half the state's approximate 6,000 agricultural employers in September. It asks about wages, bonuses and housing and is used by the U.S. Department of Labor to set minimum piece-rate wages and employment standards for employers using H-2A-visa foreign agricultural guestworkers that affect pay for domestic workers.

DOL uses a separate mandatory USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service survey to set a minimum hourly wage for H-2A workers known as the Adverse Effect Wage Rate.

"The 2016 survey is a clear improvement from the 2015 survey and comes much closer to the standards required by the Department of Labor," said Dan Fazio, WAFLA executive director.

ESD was "extremely responsive" in working with WAFLA and other stakeholders and adopted "nearly all our recommendations," Fazio said.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Francisco Trinidad, an H-2A-visa foreign guestworker, thins Gala apples at the Zirkle Fruit Co. CRO Orchard near Rock Island, Wash., on July 14. His minimum wage of \$12.69 per hour is set by government wage surveys.

WAFLA remains the subject of a state attorney general's investigation into whether it violated state or federal laws by advising growers to report hourly wages instead of piece-rate wages in ESD's 2015 wage and prevailing practices survey.

ESD concluded WAFLA's advice skewed how much workers earn picking Granny Smith, Golden Delicious and Fuji apples.

Fazio has said he's confident the guidance was legal, that the survey made growers choose between reporting hourly wages or piece rates at peak of harvest.

WAFLA warned farmers reporting piece rates when labor demand is highest could artificially inflate prevailing wages for the next season.

WAFLA and ESD will meet in late August to discuss the investigation, Fazio said.

WAFLA will host webinars for its members with ESD staff to explain the 2016 survey to growers.

The biggest change is ESD plans to separately survey workers to test the veracity of employer responses as required by DOL, Fazio said.

The survey will be conducted by the University of Washington.

The most important unresolved issue is determination of piece-rate wages, Fazio said.

Survey guidance was written over 30 years ago when employers were allowed in many places to pay solely by piece rate without any minimum hourly guarantee, he said. Federal survey guidance documents require ESD to indicate when a piece rate carries

an hourly guarantee, he said.

He said the ESD survey must quantify the hourly guarantee employers offer to accurately determine the true wage.

"Piece rates are a dynamic, market-driven pay scale that are not amenable to government surveys, mandates and wage setting," he said. "How do you capture the difference between my hourly guarantee and yours if we're not required to report it?"

Gustavo Aviles, an ESD program manager, said DOL does not require reporting of both piece rate and the hourly guarantee. He said ESD is only trying to establish the prevailing wages actually paid, whether hourly or piece-rate.

Surveys will be sent to about 3,000 employers and 6,500 workers. There is a greater chance of employers with more workers getting a survey, said Zoe Zadworny, an ESD economic analyst.

Responses are due in mid-November, she said.

The H-2A program requires free housing for workers and could also require free housing to non-employee family members if it is a prevailing practice among employers who do not use the H-2A program, Fazio said.



Courtesy of Washington State Mint Commission

The Ferguson Mint Still in Harrah, Wash., processes mint into oil. Legislative auditors have recommended that lawmakers end a sales tax exemption for processors that fuel their stills with propane.

Tax breaks for mint processors, tractor buyers under scrutiny

Auditors present report on tax laws

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Washington state lawmakers should end a tax break for mint oil processors and review a longstanding law that reduces the sales tax on some farm equipment purchases, according to legislative auditors.

The recommendations are in an annual report on tax preferences presented Wednesday to a joint House and Senate committee.

Auditors said a sales tax exemption for propane used to power spearmint and peppermint oil distilleries was not justified because the savings were not enough to encourage processors to replace diesel-powered stills.

Meanwhile, a trade-in deduction, used mostly by car buyers but applicable to virtually all goods, including tractors, has failed to increase tax revenue by stimulating sales, as promised by its proponents three decades ago, according to auditors.

The Legislature began requiring yearly studies a decade ago to scrutinize the public benefit of tax exemptions. Over the 10 years, auditors have analyzed 235 tax exemptions. Lawmakers have terminated two.

This year's report included a look at a tax break lawmakers passed in 2013 to help mint processors meet clean-air standards.

Since then, six more of the state's 28 mint oil distilleries

have converted from diesel to propane or natural gas, Washington State Mint Commission Executive Director Shane Johnson said Thursday.

The state has six diesel-fueled stills left. Converting to cleaner-burning fuels can cost up to \$250,000, Johnson said.

"I would say (the tax incentive) has been successful," he said. "Any bit helps. It isn't a cheap conversion."

The tax exemption will expire July 1, 2017, unless renewed by the Legislature.

Auditors estimate that the exemption saves 12 processors who use propane a total of about \$100,000 a year.

Processors that use natural gas don't see any savings because they pay a public utility tax, not a sales tax.

Diesel used on farms is also exempt from the sales tax and costs less than propane, according to auditors.

Auditors suggested that lawmakers consider finding another way to encourage processors to convert the six remaining diesel-powered stills.

Johnson said he welcomed discussing other incentives, but said he hoped growers and processors who have converted to cleaner-burning fuels won't lose the tax exemption.

"It would be great to encourage the stills that have not converted to do so, but my concern is how it would affect the growers who already have made the conversion," he said.

Washington is the leading producer of spearmint oil and second in peppermint oil production behind Oregon.

Washington mint oil had a farm gate value of about \$68 million in 2014, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In 1984, voters approved an initiative that allows consumers to deduct the value of trade-ins when calculating the sales tax on new purchases. Car buyers received more than 80 percent of the savings in fiscal year 2015, while buyers of farm equipment pocketed about 2 percent, or nearly \$5 million, auditors found.

Supporters in the 1984 voters guide stated that the trade-in deduction would stimulate sales of consumer goods and increase tax revenues.

Auditors concluded that hasn't happened. They estimate the deduction costs state and local governments \$182 million a year and recommended lawmakers review the law.

Rep. Drew Macewen, R-Union, rejected the idea that the state was being deprived of money.

"A tax structure that has been on the books for 32 years — kind of hard to say that we are losing revenue," he said.

AquaLocate
Seismoelectric Technology

LOCATE WATER BEFORE DRILLING BEGINS

- ✓ Depth & Yield
- ✓ Agricultural Wells
- ✓ Residential Wells
- ✓ Feasibility Studies
- ✓ Well Rehabilitation

www.AquaLocate.com • 1.800.251.2920

Reports reviewed by: Ronald A. Sorensen CA Geophysicist PGP #957 & Suzanne Dudziak Geologist OR.G1273/WA.747 ROP-27-5-2/#24

WESTERN PACKAGING

Your Future is Our Future...

WE SPECIALIZE IN BULK BAGS!

BAGS:

- Seed Bags
- Fertilizer Bags
- Feed Bags
- Potato Bags
- Printed Bags
- Plain Bags
- Bulk Bags
- Totes
- Woven Polypropylene
- Bopp
- Polyethylene
- Pocket Bags
- Roll Stock & More!

HAY PRESS SUPPORT:

- Hay Sleeves
- Strap
- Totes
- Printed or Plain
- Stretch Film (ALL GAUGES)

WAREHOUSE PACKAGING:

- Stretch Film
- Pallet Sheets
- Pallet Covers

LOCATIONS:

Albany, Oregon (MAIN OFFICE)
Ellensburg, Washington

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Phone: 855-928-3856
Fax: 541-497-6262
info@westernpackaging.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE IS OUR TOP PRIORITY!

www.westernpackaging.com

NOW SCHEDULING FOR WATER WELL DRILLING & EXPLORATION

Specializing in 10" diameter and above water wells.

- Deepening
- Reaming
- Commercial
- Irrigation

RJ EXPLORATION & DRILLING COMPANY

www.rjdrillcompany.com
509-981-6675 • ryan@rjdrillcompany.com
Licensed • Insured • Bonded • Odessa, WA