

USDA plans impact statement on deregulation of GE bentgrass

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — USDA will prepare an environmental impact statement that evaluates a petition to deregulate a genetically engineered creeping bentgrass plant that escaped field trials in 2003 and has taken root in two Oregon counties.

A notice of intent to prepare the EIS was published in the Federal Register Aug. 3, and USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service will accept public comments through Sept. 2.

The bentgrass, which is

resistant to applications of the glyphosate herbicide, was developed by Scotts Miracle-Gro Co. and Monsanto Corp. for use mainly on golf courses.

It escaped field trials in 2003 and has spread throughout parts of Malheur and Jefferson counties.

Farmers and water managers in those areas worry that because the bentgrass is resistant to glyphosate and is hard to kill, it could clog irrigation ditches and affect shipments of crops to other nations that don't accept traces of genetically modified organisms.

Some farmers in the affected counties have criticized

a 10-year agreement USDA reached with Scotts in October that lays out the company's responsibilities to help control the bentgrass.

They believe it essentially allows Scotts to walk away from its responsibility to control the grass after two years, a claim the company and USDA officials deny.

Malheur County farmer Jerry Erstrom, one of the most vocal opponents of the agreement, said it's critical that growers comment on the petition because the bentgrass could have a major impact on them.

"It's very important to com-

ment because the people from APHIS have no concept of the impact it could potentially have on Malheur County and other counties downstream," he said. "We're looking at the possibility of a major economic and ecological impact. ..."

By law, USDA is required to conduct either an environmental impact statement or a less rigorous environmental assessment of the petition.

Because of the degree of controversy involved, "We thought it was in the best interest of everybody to do an environmental impact statement," Sid Abel, assistant

deputy director of APHIS' Biotechnology Regulatory Services, told Capital Press.

The agreement USDA reached with Scotts last fall is "distinct and separate from the request for deregulation" and will not be impacted by it, Abel said.

However, he added, the information included in the agreement will have an impact on the EIS and will be the basis for how it's written.

Federal law requires USDA to determine whether the creeping bentgrass is a plant pest and the agency will look at whether it poses a risk to other plants, agricultural production systems

and biological resources.

According to the Federal Register, the petition for deregulation by Scotts and Monsanto states the plant is "unlikely to pose a plant pest risk and, therefore, should not be (regulated)."

A preliminary review has determined the bentgrass likely isn't a plant pest, Abel said.

In its review, USDA will also be looking at the agronomic consequences of the bentgrass out-crossing to weedy species, including the possible impact on crop rotation practices, herbicide use and tillage. It will also examine the possible impact on farm exports.

UI seeks partnership with Peru potato center

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — The University of Idaho is negotiating a partnership with the International Potato Center in Lima, Peru, involving the sharing of scientific expertise and providing UI's potato program better access to a vast gene bank.

In addition to employing top potato scientists, the Center houses a gene bank with more than 4,000 selections of potato varieties, wild potato relatives and ancient potatoes cultivated thousands of years ago in the Andes, dating back to the Incas.

The ongoing discussions stem from May 2015, when UI plant science professor Mike Thornton and Bob Haggerty, international programs director with UI's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, visited Peru as part of a trade mission facilitated by Idaho Gov. Butch Otter. Thornton believes partnering with the center, located in the region where potatoes originated, would be a boon for UI's potato breeding efforts.

"If you're looking for new sources of genes to solve potato problems — like late blight, or potato cyst nematode, you name it — that is the most likely place you're going to find those resources," Thornton said.

Thornton joined UI Extension potato storage specialist Nora Olsen and Joe Kuhl, an associate professor specializing in biotechnology, this



Barbara Wells, director of the International Potato Center, joins Peruvian farmers, showing off tissue culture plantlets of native potato landraces they are working to preserve. University of Idaho is seeking to partner with the center.

spring on a six-day return trip to the center and nearby potato farms. The UI officials were scheduled to meet again with center personnel Aug. 2 during the Potato Association of America meeting in Michigan.

The center works closely with native growers, who conduct variety trials on their small farms to evaluate material. Kuhl said partnering with the center would also provide UI access to "individuals with intimate knowledge of the material that goes well beyond what might be available in a database."

In return, Thornton believes UI provides a diverse set of potato scientists with knowledge in virology, food science, agronomy and other

facets of the industry.

"I think we've got as good of a scientific group as anywhere in the world, so I think we can help them," Thornton said.

Thornton is interested in partnering with a Prosser, Wash., USDA scientist on a nutrition screening of 17 colorful center varieties. Potato pigments are linked with several health benefits. The samples would be freeze-dried to kill potential pathogens.

Kuhl hopes to get a special permit to bring Peruvian lines to Idaho to screen a population of potatoes derived from parents known to resist nematodes.

The information would help Kuhl isolate a genetic marker for pale cyst nema-

tode resistance, aiding future breeding efforts and providing insight into an area the Peruvian center is not equipped to study.

Olsen would like to assist the center in its mission to feed the world's poor by "bridging information, technology, ideas and science from developed countries to developing countries." She foresees an eventual exchange of scientists and graduate students between the facilities.

Haggerty has set aside funding to continue working toward an agreement, noting the center has locations in other major potato production regions, and a partnership would also help UI build its global network. He said UI discovered it had reached a memorandum of understanding with the center 25 years ago but did little to act upon it.



Excavators breach a dike Aug. 1 in Skagit County, Wash., to expose 131 acres of former farmland to Puget Sound salt water to create fish habitat.

Washington breaches dike to convert farmland to fish habitat

More land likely to be converted

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

CONWAY, Wash. — Excavators breached a dike Aug. 1 that for more than a century had protected farmland, furthering a state and federal plan to convert thousands of acres of agricultural fields into salmon habitat in the Skagit River Delta.

Excavators started digging a gap in the 12-foot-high dike in the morning. By late afternoon, Puget Sound's high tide was spreading saltwater over 131 acres that previously grew crops such as broccoli, red potatoes and vegetable seeds.

Tiny fish were swimming at the toe of a new dike farther inland on Fir Island, between the river's south and north forks, which empty into the sound.

The head of a farm group accepted the conversion of cropland into a fish-rearing estuary as a regulatory necessity, but he wasn't rejoicing.

"It's not a celebratory time," said Brandon Roozen, director of the Western Washington Agricultural Association. "There's been blood, sweat and tears spent on that land that keeps it fertile."

The agricultural association represents a dozen diking, drainage and irrigation districts that serve farmers over 54,000 acres.

The association agreed several years ago to a plan to convert up to 2,700 acres of agricultural land to create enough habitat for 1.35 million endangered chinook salmon smolts annually.

In return, the districts will be able to repair and replace the tide gates that make farming in the delta possible, but are seen by regulatory agencies as blocking fish from historical habitat.

Roozen said districts had to compromise to have a chance to maintain their systems.

"It's the best we can possibly do, in my opinion," he said. "We're caught between a rock and a hard place."

The dike breaching Aug. 1 climaxed a \$16.4 million project to create a marsh on land the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife bought in 1980. The department purchased the property for a winter refuge for snow geese, but leased the ground to farmers in the summer.

The new marsh is expected to create habitat for 65,000 to 320,600 smolts annually.

The state has other property in the delta that it may convert into fish habitat, but eventually it likely will need to buy private farmland to meet the program's goal.

"You add all (the state properties) together and your short maybe 1,000 acres. The challenge will be to close the gap," said Bob Everitt, WDFW's North Puget Sound regional director. "The property has to be in the right place. It's got to be along the bay front."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service and The Nature Conservancy, a private group, helped fund the project. The federal government contributed \$2.31 million, or 15 percent.

William Stelle, the West Coast administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the agency hopes Congress will fund more such projects, which he said will benefit farmers, as well as fish advocates.

"We fish heads need farmers on the landscape, and we need to find where the sweet spot is for both communities and get to that place," he said.

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