

Harney County SWD plans suit over range management plan

By KATY NESBITT
For the Capital Press

BURNS, Ore. — A recent decision by the federal government kept greater sage grouse off the endangered species list, but Harney County ranchers, displeased with the Bureau of Land Management’s range management plan amendment, are considering taking their complaint to court.

Louie Molt, chairman of the Harney County Soil and Water District, said BLM disregarded input from rural communities.

“When they were writing the range management plan amendment they asked counties and soil and water districts to come up with their own ideas about how to protect sage grouse and keep the rural community viable,” Molt said. “The BLM took our rural alternative and threw it in the trash.”

The county filed a protest, Molt said, and is now considering legal action. Out of a list of 10 or so complaints, Oregon Cattlemen’s Association President John O’Keefe, a rancher in neighboring Lake County, said one of the biggest concerns is conflicting research over stubble height.

“It’s the implementation phase that is being challenged,” O’Keefe said. “There is research that has come out that the seven-inch minimum stubble height requirement has flaws in the science.”

O’Keefe said peer-reviewed research from the University of Nevada-Reno raises questions about whether sampling bias might affect the estimates of cover needed for ground-nesting birds. Daniel Gibson, Erik Blomberg and James Sedinger from the Program in Ecology, Evolution and Conservation Biology analyzed the timing of nest survival surveys to determine required vegetative cover.

“One of the biggest concerns about the resource management plan is they placed a lot of emphasis on habitat assessment, including seven-inch stubble height,” O’Keefe said. “If we are going to manage for additional vegetation with additional wildfire, we are concerned where the BLM is going.”

The bias, according to the study, lies when stubble height is measured — at nest failure from predation or at predicted hatch date. Based on the study, the measurements taken at predicted hatch date more accurately predicted the influence of grass height on nest survival.

“Gibson showed if you re-

move the bias from sampling it shows grass height is not related to nest success,” O’Keefe said. “The BLM is over-emphasizing stubble height at the expense of wildfire, and that concerns us. We are worried they will cut permits on a non-existing nesting threat to the detriment of a fire threat, and in a lot of these areas the grass matures at or below the seven-inch level,” O’Keefe said.

Fearing negotiations to address the protest would fail, the Harney County district started nesting money for a lawsuit. Molt said the district set a minimum goal of \$50,000 before it would consider going to court; by Aug. 12 the soil and water district had raised \$51,000.

“We are certainly willing to go back to the table with them, but we need to have the right people at the table, possibly (Interior) Secretary (Sally) Jewell,” he said.

“We’d like to try to collaborate one last time — we collaborated until we are blue in the face and we have nothing to show that works for us,” Molt said. “We will not proceed with filing suit until we give them one last opportunity to come back to the table to give us something we can live with.”

Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said his organization supports Harney County’s actions and donated \$5,000 to the fund.

“Oregon cattlemen are still trying to negotiate with the BLM on the implementation and on this rule and if we were to sign on to this suit we give up our ability to negotiate on this, but we support our local cattlemen’s group in what they are doing here,” Rosa said.

Molt said now that the original goal has been met the second goal is to raise \$100,000 and the far, outreaching goal is \$250,000.

Molt said it comes down to protecting the livelihoods of ranchers dependent on public use permits.

“We will all be extremely affected if the permits are canceled. Who am I going to sell my bulls or my hay to?” Molt said. “We have got to look out for our own country, if we don’t no one else will. Rural America is getting choked out. The people who live here, who would like to continue to live here, are the best stewards on the ground. People think we are destroying it. Are we that dumb that we would destroy our own livelihood?”

Hair sheep gaining popularity

By JOHN O’CONNELL
Capital Press

BANCROFT, Idaho — Brett Crump is a neophyte sheep rancher with a small flock, but he believes he’s found the ideal breed to keep his operation afloat as he seeks to grow it.

Crump raises 40 hair sheep on his 80-acre ranch, also turning them loose at the nearby Chesterfield ghost town each spring to supplement his forage while providing weed control for the historic site.

Crump said hair sheep remain little known in Eastern Idaho, but they’re rapidly gaining popularity among ranchers elsewhere in the U.S. due to the ease of raising them.

Crump, who sells directly to consumers, shares freezer space and the Stanger Ranch label with his neighbors to cut costs. But his greatest efficiency has come from choosing two breeds of hair sheep — Dorpers and Texas Dalls.

Hair sheep, like the wild ancestors of modern wool sheep, have course hair that they shed — an attractive feature nowadays, with wool prices so low fleece sales often generate less than the labor costs of shearing.

Crump said hair sheep are well adapted to the heat of his high-desert environment, one of the reasons they’re gaining traction in hot regions such as the Southwest and Midwest. They’re also hardy, require little attention while lambing



John O’Connell/Capital Press
Bancroft, Idaho, rancher Brett Crump walks through the pasture with his hair sheep, which are gaining popularity because they don’t require shearing.

and can reproduce twice within 14 months.

Best of all, Crump insists their meat has a milder flavor that his customers love, though they don’t grow as big as most wool sheep.

“People are hesitant until they try it, and once they try it, they’re sold,” said Crump, who bought his first hair sheep from a Rexburg rancher five years ago. “It’s new to this area, and as with all things new, it just takes time.”

In 2013 and 2014 the hair sheep breeds Katahdin and Dorper both ranked among the top three breeds for numbers of registered animals. According to a 2011 USDA survey, 20 percent of sheep operations in the 22 top sheep producing states had some hair sheep, which averaged 11

percent of their herds.

Katahdin Hair Sheep International, which has 1,100 paid members, had its annual meeting in Cookeville, Tenn., Aug. 4-5. Jim Morgan, the organization’s operations manager from Fayetteville, Ark., said hair sheep have experienced rapid growth in the Southwest, especially among ranches with fewer than 30 acres, where raising cattle wouldn’t be efficient.

“Almost all hair sheep would be considered an easy-care animal,” Morgan said.

Hair sheep growth has been especially pronounced in Texas, where producers have begun re-entering the industry after exiting a few years ago, when shearing costs began to exceed wool revenue.

“Everybody going back

into the sheep industry is going to hair sheep,” said Randy McCrea, a Sterling City, Texas, hair sheep rancher and president of the North American Hair Sheep Association. “I’d never go back to wool sheep.”

Kathy Lewis, a Bonanza, Ore., Dorper rancher with a flock that often reaches 1,000 sheep, has noticed a significant increase recently in the sales of ewes for breeding, selling animals to ranchers both within her home state and as far away as the Philippines. She’s sold some breeding ewes to wheat farmers in Western Oregon and Washington, who plan to graze their stubble. The growth in the Dorper category reminds Lewis of the rise of Angus beef several years ago.

Idaho-Oregon onion growers seek cause of new plant disease

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

ONTARIO, Ore. — Onion growers in Eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho are dealing with a new plant disease that can damage the inside of onions, but so far they don’t know what’s causing it or how to prevent it.

Oregon State University researchers are conducting field trials to try to answer those questions.

“We know what the problem is real well but we don’t know what’s causing it or how to manage it,” said Clint Shock, director of OSU’s Malheur County experiment station.

The disease is caused by a plant pathogen known as fusarium proliferatum and can damage the inside of the onion. An affected onion looks fine on the outside but is not desirable to consumers when they cut it open.

That particular type of



Sean Ellis/Capital Press
Clint Shock, director of Oregon State University’s Malheur County research station, discusses a field trial that is trying to determine the cause of a new onion disease causing problems for growers in Eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho, during a recent field day.

fusarium fungi has caused a few cases of so-called onion bulb rot over the years but it became a major issue in 2014 and 2015, said OSU Cropping Systems Extension Agent Stuart Reitz.

“Over the past couple of years we’ve seen it become a real serious problem,” he said. “We’re trying to figure out, is

there some trigger that makes onions susceptible to getting the disease.”

One theory being explored in the Malheur County field trial is that high temperatures cause a condition known as dry scale, which is when the top of the onion doesn’t completely close, leaving a small opening where the

fungal pathogen can enter.

The 2014 and 2015 summers in this region had unusually high temperatures. The OSU field trial includes heat strips that make the soil around the onion bulbs hotter.

“By sampling onions every week, we’re trying to understand when the defects start to show up ... and see if temperature is a factor,” Shock said. “If temperature is a factor, there are various approaches we can take to try to reduce the bulb temperature.”

A separate trial is exploring the effectiveness of different fungicides that have proven beneficial in treating related fusarium pathogens that impact other crops.

Reitz is also collecting samples from farms around the region “and looking at different varieties and growing conditions, trying to track when we see the problem coming on so growers can use fungicides at the right time instead of having to spray all year long.”

Washington State University licenses technology to fight cattle disease

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Washington State University has licensed gene-editing technology used to breed cattle more resistant to bovine respiratory disease.

Bovine respiratory disease is the primary cause of cattle mortality in the U.S. It is caused by a combination of stress and viral and bacterial infections. Infected animals develop pneumonia that is often fatal. The disease particularly impacts calves, according to WSU.

BRD causes roughly \$1 billion in market losses each year to the industry, said Bryan Slinker, dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine.

“If we can generate cattle both on the dairy and beef side that are resistant to that disease, it would be a huge impact on the industry in limiting those market losses,” Slinker said.

Resistant cattle would also reduce the use of antibiotics and the associated costs, Slinker said.

“It would be a huge deal to generate animals that resist

disease and are socially acceptable,” he said.

Researcher Subramaniam Srikumaran studied how the BRD complex develops and methods of prevention, according to a WSU press release. He learned about a specific gene’s role in developing the disease.

By making a single edit in the CD18 gene, which is

responsible for an adhesive protein on the surface of white blood cells, he is able to block the bacterial toxin that triggers lung inflammation and pneumonia characteristic of BRD.

Srikumaran patented the technology through WSU’s Office of Commercialization, which negotiated a licensing agreement with Genus PLC,

a global animal genetics company.

What researchers learn about bovine pneumonia is also applicable to humans, said Kris Johnson, an animal sciences professor. Such breakthroughs could lead to improvements in how people are treated for disease.

WSU will examine the animals produced to see how

resistant they are and pursue further gene-editing to refine the process.

“There’s probably more work to be done,” Slinker said. “The first animals look like they’re partially resistant, but not fully resistant.”

Slinker said WSU used a technology different from new CRISPR/Cas9 gene-editing system.

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