

Rancher dealing with 320-sheep loss to fire

Cost estimated at \$50,000-\$60,000

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

VALLEYFORD, Wash. — Dale Dietrich says the forest land he rented to raise his sheep once looked like the entrance to a park.

Now there’s not a lot left.

As he drives down the hillside in his Jeep, the land and trees are charred black. Most of the trees don’t have pine needles any more.

“It’s just depressing,” the Valleyford, Wash., rancher said. “You go out, take a look at it and there’s not a quick fix.”

Dietrich raises Dorper and Katahdin sheep on 800 to 1,000 acres here on a part-time basis to sell for meat. He lost 320, about two-thirds of his flock, to the 6,017-acre Yale Road fire.

He has “a couple hundred” sheep left, he said.

He also lost several hundred round bales of hay and about a mile’s worth of electric fencing.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Valleyford, Wash., sheep farmer Dale Dietrich stands in the middle of rented forest ground damaged by a fire in August. Dietrich lost 320 sheep to the Yale Road Fire, and estimates \$50,000 to \$60,000 in damages.

“We didn’t lose any buildings, so we were lucky in that respect,” he said.

He estimates the total cost to his operation at \$50,000 to \$60,000.

“Obviously it really sets you back, because it’s taken years to get the animals that you’ve bred and raised and hand-picked and babied along,” he said. “Anybody with livestock knows it’s not a quick turnaround. To build the numbers back up is kind of difficult.”

Dietrich didn’t have insurance on the sheep or hay.

“I don’t know of too many people that have insurance on sheep, or cattle for that matter,” he said. “You don’t expect anything like this to go through.”

Chris Bieker, outreach coordinator with the USDA Farm Service Agency office in Spokane, said the agency has received livestock indemnity program applications for 314 sheep due to wildfire losses in Spokane County.

Ranchers have 30 days to file a notice of loss after the loss becomes apparent.

Would Dietrich get insurance now?

“I doubt I ever will,” he said. “I don’t expect anything like this to ever happen again. There’s no fuel out here for anything to burn.”

It was the first fire Dietrich has experienced in 15 years.

“It’s just something that you never expect would happen to you,” he said. “You always hear of it happening maybe somewhere else.”

The fire burned up Dietrich’s planned forage pasture through winter. He’s feeding his animals hay, which he usually starts in early November.

Some neighbors have offered or donated hay. A friend set up a GoFundMe campaign for him. Dietrich isn’t sure how much some USDA programs will pay him.

He plans to get his sheep numbers back up, but said it will take several years.

“It’ll just take a little time to get back to where we were,” he said.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Jim Gilbert and Lorraine Gardner of Northwoods Nursery near Molalla, Ore., examine bare root trees grown in raised beds covered in plastic sheeting. The system, known as plasticulture, improves weed control, water usage and plant vigor.

Nursery adopts plasticulture for trees

System improves weed control, water usage

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

MOLALLA, Ore. — With farmworkers in short supply, nursery producers Jim Gilbert and Lorraine Gardner faced an uphill battle against weeds.

Two years ago, labor shortages caused some fruit tree blocks at their Northwoods Nursery to be completely overrun with weeds, forcing them to take a new approach.

“The weeds won. We couldn’t put enough people on it to keep them under control,” said Gilbert.

That same year, they decided to experiment with a technique they’d encountered in South Korea: growing bare root trees in raised beds covered in plastic sheeting.

The method, known as plasticulture, is more commonly associated with strawberry production, but South Korean farmers — who also face labor shortages — use it with persimmon trees.

“When you have limited land and limited labor, you need to find more efficient ways of growing,” Gardner said.

Though weed control provided a major motivation for Northwoods Nursery to try the technique, plasticulture has since proven to have other benefits.

Plastic heats the soil by 5 to 7 degrees Fahrenheit while preserving water, allowing the trees to grow quicker — especially since they face less competition, said Gardner.

“There’s no weed competition in the root zone,” she said.

Improved plant vigor allows Northwoods Nursery to grow twice as many plants per row, which means Gilbert and Gardner can devote less land to nursery stock and can plant it with cover crops more often.

The nursery plants Sudan-grass during the summer for biomass, then common vetch over the winter to fix nitrogen.

Gilbert and Gardner initially doubled the number of plants per acre, but then had to widen the space between rows to better accommodate tractors for mowing. Nonetheless, their nursery still produces 70 percent more plants per acre with the method.

Plasticulture also improved the operation’s flexibility, since the soil can be worked up in fall and then covered in plastic sheeting with a special \$7,000 tractor-pulled implement.

Before the nursery switched to plasticulture, Gilbert and Gardner sometimes had to wait until April for soils to dry enough for planting.

Now, they can plant trees during the winter because the plastic sheets “lock in” soil conditions during the fall, Gardner said.

Better drainage also means fewer problems with diseases associated with water-logged soils, such as phytophthora, Gilbert said.

Soils retain water for a longer time under plastic, so the nursery doesn’t have to begin irrigating until July.

In the past, plants have grown so quickly under the system that they’d become too big for the nursery’s customers to conveniently handle.

The solution is likely to reduce fertilizer and water usage, Gardner said. “We’re still learning as we go.”

States will receive millions to help implement produce safety rule

By **SEAN ELLIS**
Capital Press

State agriculture departments will receive millions of dollars in grants from the federal government to educate farmers about new produce safety rule and help them comply with the many requirements.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration will award \$22 million this year, and will gradually increase the amount of money to the states over the next four years.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture will receive \$1.02 million in year one and \$11.7 million over five years, while the Washington State Department of Agriculture will receive \$800,000 this year and \$6.5 million total.

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture and Oregon Department of Agriculture will receive \$430,000 and \$700,000 in year one, respectively, and those amounts will gradually increase over the next four years.

The produce safety rule is one of seven the FDA has developed to comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act and it will require farmers who grow fruits and vegetables that are consumed raw to comply with numerous provisions meant to ensure food safety.

In Idaho, the ISDA will work with University of Idaho Extension to determine the size and scope of the produce industry in Idaho to find out which farmers will be impacted by the produce rule, said ISDA Chief of Staff Pamm Juker.

The money will also be used for outreach, education



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Onions are harvested in an Idaho field in this file photo. FDA will award millions of dollars to state ag departments to help implement the agency’s produce safety rule, which will affect farmers who grow onions and other produce consumed raw.

and technical assistance to help farmers align with the rule’s requirements, Juker said.

ISDA Director Celia Gould told Capital Press in an email that Idaho has been working closely with neighboring states for several years in anticipation of the FSMA regulations “to make the transition into produce regulation as smooth as possible for producers.”

“This grant funding is a good next step in our efforts to develop an outreach and education curriculum as well as a plan for on-farm technical assistance,” Gould said.

WSDA Communications

Director Hector Castro said Washington will develop a produce safety plan with the goal being “to make sure farmers are able to comply with the produce safety rule.”

Idaho-East Oregon Onion Committee Chairman Kay Riley said a lack of guidance from FDA on many details of the rule’s requirements worries onion growers, who are most concerned with the rule’s new standards for agricultural water.

“There is a lack of education,” Riley said. “I don’t know that any of us knows exactly what’s required of us.”

Idaho and Oregon onion growers said the FDA’s initial

proposed produce rule would have made it nearly impossible to grow onions in the region.

Their opposition to some of the rule’s proposed standards resulted in FDA altering several provisions, including the agricultural water requirements.

The final rule is much better and onion farmers can live with it but they are still concerned, Riley said.

“Yes, it’s going to work but how much is it going to cost us and how much effort will be associated with it?” he said. “We’re cautiously optimistic about the future of this but still worried nonetheless.”

Washington dairies slow to adopt reporting system

Unreported cow sales distresses WSDA

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Washington dairy operators are not using a new internet-based system to report cattle transactions, according to a state Department of Agriculture report, frustrating an attempt to improve the state’s ability to contain livestock diseases.

“It’s disappointing,” the WSDA’s assistant director of animal services, Lynn Briscoe, said Tuesday. “We’re reliant on the industry to do the right thing.”

WSDA activated the system Jan. 26 to help dairies comply with a new requirement to report all sales of unbranded female cows.

Until this year, sales involving 15 or fewer unbranded females did not

Online
www.agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/Livestock

have to be reported. WSDA ended the exemption, saying unreported movements of cattle could thwart tracing the source and spread of livestock diseases.

The dairy industry asked for the electronic system as a cheaper and more convenient alternative to WSDA inspecting in person the small, private-party sales.

So far, however, only six of the state’s 400 dairies have registered to use the system and only one sale has been reported electronically.

“We had hoped to see more,” Briscoe said Tuesday. “Producers need to participate for the betterment of the industry.”

Washington State Dairy Federation Director Dan Wood said electronic report-

ing will work, in time.

“It’s new. People might be waiting for others to jump in and see how it works,” he said. “I think it will catch on because it’s less expensive.”

Beef cattle groups want dairies to report all cow sales. Besides helping WSDA trace animal diseases, the Washington Beef Commission should benefit. The previously unreported sales will be subject to the \$1.50 per head beef checkoff.

WSDA and cattle industry representatives say it’s impossible to estimate how many sales are going unreported. “There’s absolutely no way to know, and that’s the challenge and the frustration,” Washington Cattlemen’s Association Executive Vice President Jack Field said.

“I think there are many people who share my frustration with the lack of accountability from the dairy industry,” he said.

Feds urge against Supreme Court review of Hage dispute

‘Sagebrush rebellion’ icon seeks reversal of 9th Circuit ruling

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

The federal government is urging the U.S. Supreme Court not to review its lawsuit with deceased Nevada rancher Wayne Hage, an icon of the “Sagebrush Rebellion.”

Hage’s decades-long battles with federal agencies have become emblematic of the broad resistance to government management of public lands.

His son, Wayne N. Hage, and estate have asked the nation’s highest court to review a ruling by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that overturned a significant victory for the family.

The U.S. Department of Justice has requested that the Supreme Court let that decision stand because there’s not a significant legal controversy that would justify such a review.

A significant and convoluted legal point is whether the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management denied Hage’s family access to their water rights on public lands.

In 2013, a federal judge held that the agencies had engaged in a “conspiracy” to deprive

Hage of his water rights and due process rights, but the 9th Circuit Court reversed that decision.

The 9th Circuit found that Hage’s cattle could not cross federal property unless he had a grazing permit, which meant he committed trespass by allowing cattle to access the family’s water rights on public land.

Hage’s family is now asking the U.S. Supreme Court to analyze that decision because it diverges from another appellate ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. Attorneys for Hage argue that the 9th Circuit contradicted legal precedent that allows cattle to access water rights across the West, which was affirmed by the Federal Circuit in regard to Hage.

Department of Justice attorneys, on the other hand, claim there is no conflict between the federal appellate courts because the Federal Circuit found that government-installed fencing did not block Hage’s cattle from accessing water.

Mark Pollot, attorney for Hage’s estate, said this interpretation is incorrect because fencing wasn’t his only obstacle to water rights — the federal government also threatened Hage with prosecution.

“There is a vast gulf between what the 9th Circuit said and what the Federal Circuit said,” Pollot said.