

Washington

Wheat farmers ask RMA for help with falling numbers

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Pacific Northwest farmers are asking the USDA for help in dealing with sprout damage that has impacted much of this year’s wheat crop.

They want USDA Risk Management Agency Administrator Brandon Willis to make an exception to the procedure the agency uses to calculate a farmer’s actual production history, or APH, said Michelle Hennings, executive director of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers.

The APH is used to determine a farmer’s crop insurance premium.

Farmers are being docked because of low falling numbers caused by sprout damage, but they are not qualifying for crop insurance payments because their yields are still high, Hennings said.

At the same time, the low falling numbers can cause a farmer’s crop insurance premium to increase, creating a double-whammy.

“They’re docked at the elevator to begin with, and they go over to their insurance company and they’re getting docked again,” she said. “This is very detrimental to a farmer’s bottom line.”

Grain elevators use the Hagberg-Perten falling number test to measure starch damage due to sprouting. A low falling number indicates a high level of alpha amylase, an enzyme that degrades starch and diminishes the quality of wheat.

Wheat with a falling number below 300 typically receives a discount. Rain and temperature fluctuations are the primary cause of the damage.

As of Sept. 13, 42 percent of soft white wheat samples collected by the Washington State Grain Inspection

showed a falling number of 300 or lower, as did 43 percent of club wheat, 20 percent of hard red winter wheat and 10 percent of hard red spring wheat.

“Farmers are upset because they feel quality and price should not be affecting their actual production if their yields are high,” Hennings said.

Farmers provide crop insurance agencies with settlement sheets from elevator companies showing the gross number of bushels they harvested. The paperwork also shows the falling numbers and other dockage.

The crop insurance company calculates a farmer’s yields based on reported acres and gross bushels. The falling number factor is based on RMA’s discount chart for quality adjustment.

If a farmer’s APH goes down over a 10-year period, he is more of a risk, and his crop insurance premiums increase Hennings said.

Some newer farmers who have low falling numbers could potentially be put out of business this year, Hennings said.

Using a farmer’s yields will keep their APH “at a reasonable level, so they don’t see an increase in their insurance” premium, she said.

WAWG is looking into instances where other exceptions were made, Hennings said.

A letter from members of the House and Senate, led by Washington Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, was slated to arrive on Willis’ desk Sept. 26. The Washington State Department of Agriculture is also providing a letter of support.

“This is what we can do now for farmers to help alleviate some of the stressful situation on crop conditions,” Hennings said.

Winery nears completion of first phase

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

GEORGE, Wash. — A cluster of tall, white, cylindrical structures meets the eye of motorists on State Route 281 just north of George.

People think they’re some sort of grain silos and are surprised when they learn they’re the first phase of one of the largest wineries in the state, says Brandon Rice, winemaker and facilities manager of Ancient Lake Wine Co., a subsidiary of Milbrandt Evergreen Inc. of Quincy, Wash.

It looks more industrial than what people visualize when they think of wineries. It’s the first tenant of the Port of Quincy’s industrial park at George.

The first of the “silos” went up in 2014 and now there are 114 with more to come. They’re actually stainless steel fermentation tanks for wine grape juice sprayed with white, resin-based insulation, 3 to 4-inches thick, to keep juice between 55 and 65 degrees, a temperature critical for fermentation.

The tanks range from 12 to 14 feet in diameter and 20 to 28 feet tall. There are nine 9,000-gallon tanks, 49 18,000-gallon tanks and 56 34,000-gallon tanks. Eleven more 34,000-gallon tanks will go in this fall along with a 250,000-gallon tank, 35 feet wide and 40 feet tall, Rice said.

That will finish phase one



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Brandon Rice, winemaker and facilities manager of Ancient Lake Wine Co., watches grapes conveyed from the dump tank to a crush tank.

at about \$10 million, he said. All phases will total about \$40 million when phase four is completed in 2040 or 2045, he said.

The winery processed 1,200 tons of wine grapes in 2014, 9,000 tons in 2015 and will handle about 12,000 tons this year, he said.

Capacity will be 17,000 tons which is 2.4 million gallons of wine by end of phase one and will be 50,000 tons and 8 million gallons by end of phase four, Rice said.

It’s already one of the largest half-dozen or so crushing plants and wineries in the state, he said.

The insulated fermentation tanks all sit outside, saving warehousing costs. But a 40,000-square-foot warehouse for bottling and case storage will be completed at

the end of phase two by the end of 2017. Bottling capacity will be 250 bottles per minute which is 10,000 cases per day.

Phase three will be an 85,000-square-foot barrel room that may be 10 years out.

The plant is centrally located in Central Washington’s wine grape growing region and is just a couple miles north of Interstate 90, providing good access to Seattle and Spokane.

Milbrandt Evergreen has 1,500 acres of vineyard within a few miles of the plant and grapes are being trucked in from as far as the Tri-Cities.

The plant is needed because of vineyard expansion plans of Milbrandt and others, Rice said.

“The wine industry is growing at 3 percent a year

nationally, but California is stagnant. So a fair hunk of the growth is in Washington,” he said.

The plant is producing different wine styles for different labels. It saves large and small wineries the cost of their own equipment, allowing them to build capital more quickly for other needs, Rice said.

The plant has 10 full-time employees and five seasonal workers during grape crushing in September and October.

Grapes arrive at the plant, are crushed and the juice pumped into the tanks for fermentation for two weeks to a month and then is extracted as mid- to high-quality bulk wine, he said. A 900,000-gallon pond collects waste water which is used for field irrigation, and grape skins are used for cattle feed.

Greater Spokane leaders support ag priorities

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

SPOKANE — One of Todd Mielke’s greatest frustrations is that people outside Spokane see his organization as representing only the city’s biggest businesses.

Not so, says Mielke, who

in February took over as CEO of Greater Spokane Inc., which functions as the chamber of commerce and economic development council for the region.

“Seventy-five percent of our members have 50 or fewer employees,” Mielke said. And “we have always been

regional.”

GSI’s 1,200 members employ roughly 44 percent of the 225,000 employees in the area.

The organization raises awareness of agriculture throughout the region, through events such as the Spokane Ag Expo and Pacific

Northwest Farm Forum. The organization also advocates for agriculture, particularly on regulatory issues and in land-use discussions.

“We’re seeing a growing trend where these regulations are coming at a local level, and there’s some serious ramifications for that,” Mielke said. “We’re dealing with commodities that have worldwide competition, and the slightest amount of regulation that puts them at a competitive disadvantage has extreme ramifications with their ability to compete and be profitable.”

Mielke also hears from companies struggling to find applicants for jobs. Employers are willing to offer on-the-job training to workers who show up on time and can pass a drug test, he said.

“While many would think that’s tied to the legalization of marijuana and think it’s younger folks, what we’re hearing is it’s all drugs and it’s all age groups,” he said.

As agriculture becomes more efficient and uses more advanced technology, Mielke expects fewer people to be involved in food production.

The Spokane Ag Expo will mark its 40th year in 2017. The event always looks to offer a broader appeal, considering a parade of equipment and dynamic speakers such as the Peterson Farm Brothers, who spoke in 2016.

“The idea is, how do we maximize the public exposure, so they understand the innovations, challenges and opportunities,” he said.

In the months ahead, Mielke said GSI will weigh its existing efforts against its goals.

“We do about 370 events/meetings every year,” he said. “Part of the question is ... does every one of those meetings and events meet with the tactics to move our efforts forward? Is it the best use of our efforts or is there a better way to achieve that goal? We’re going to have to evaluate each one.”

GSI serves as a “convener,” said AgriBusiness Council chairman Jay Allert, a Rosalia, Wash., cattle rancher. The agriculture council has a say in the organization’s agenda, but also influences members and member-companies, such as retail chemical associations or other industry parts.

“We can speak as a group instead of one voice, because these issues affect many industries,” Allert said. “If we can all get together it makes us stronger.”



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