

Tucking in grass seed fields for the winter

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

Grass seed growers, like most farmers, know a successful crop has a lot to do with what happens directly after harvest. Several things are taken into consideration when putting a grass seed field to bed for the winter.

First, there's cleaning up the post-harvest mess, said David McCready, senior agronomist at Wilco in Harrisburg, Ore.

"Grass seed straw and residue is removed by baling and/or flailing and redistributed to even things out," McCready said. "If irrigation's available, especially on dry, low water-holding soils, people often irrigate post-harvest, either to keep plants alive

or for overall crop health."

A soil-residual herbicide is usually applied to prevent or eliminate germinated seedlings.

"The biggest single thing are volunteers from the crop we just harvested," he said. "The most efficient harvest operations can easily have 200-500 pounds of seed that didn't get in the tank."

Slugs and voles are perennial pests but grass seed crops rarely have problems with insects.

Growers will apply fall fertilizers as needed, based on soil testing and experience or use a balanced fertilizer. From the advent of GPS — global positioning systems — and a desire to manage field inconsistencies and use sustainable practices, the industry developed new variable-rate technology that

creates application maps for individual nutrients. With variable rate, soil only gets what it needs.

Lime is commonly applied to balance pH and calcium levels as well.

"Our typical tall fescue farmer has to put a 1-ton application of top dress lime about the third year on a five-harvest rotation," McCready said.

Potash is necessary to offset its removal with the straw. In quoting an Oregon State Extension Service article, McCready said a ton of tall fescue straw contains about 30 pounds of potassium.

"It takes 50 pounds of muriate of potash to replace what is removed," McCready said, adding that straw yields run 2.5 to 4 tons per acre.

"We used to hardly remove any potash, especially when we burned fields, and now the majority of it seems to be baled," McCready said. "A lot of people don't realize how much is removed in the straw. We've just kind of mined the soil and suddenly we wake up to the stark reality that where we used to have good soil tests (and) now we don't."

Management of weeds, water, pests and soil are a perennial concern to most farmers, and each crop and location requires a different regime.



Courtesy Wilco
Senior agronomist David McCready and Scot Solberg of Wilco consult at a lime application. Managing soil fertility is one of many post-harvest tasks.



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