

Tree fruit growers wary of 'predictive scheduling' requirement

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — "Predictive scheduling" for employees is one of several issues the Washington State Tree Fruit Association will be watching during the upcoming legislative session in Olympia.

Predictive scheduling ordinances gained popularity in some California cities several years ago.

More recently, Seattle passed an ordinance requiring employers of retail and food service workers to give them

several weeks' notice of their work schedules.

"It might work in an office setting but not really in an agricultural setting. We will have to watch that one closely," Jon DeVaney, the tree fruit association president, said at the group's annual meeting in Wenatchee in early December.

Growers often decide when to tend or harvest crops in quick response to weather, crop maturity and other factors.

The Seattle ordinance is the type of law that can be limited to certain workers at

first and later be expanded, DeVaney said.

Other issues the association will be monitoring include the minimum wage increase, sick leave and pesticide regulations.

Initiative 1433, passed by voters in the Nov. 8 general election, increases the state minimum wage from \$9.47 to \$11 per hour on Jan. 1. It reaches \$13.50 by 2020. The new law also requires all employers provide sick leave for full-time and seasonal employees.

The Department of Labor and Industries is just starting

rule-making for tracking sick leave, DeVaney said.

Sick leave accrues at one hour for every 40 hours worked beginning on the first day of employment. A full-time employee working 40 hours per week would accrue 6.5 days per year.

Seasonal workers who leave an employer but then return are entitled to continue accruing from where they left off if it's within 12 months.

Dan Fazio, director of WAFSA, formerly the Washington Farm Labor Association, has said it's unfair and difficult for employers to track

sick leave of employees coming and going. It shouldn't accrue if an employee is gone for more than 90 days, he argued.

The tree fruit association also will watch for any legislative bills seeking to increase no-spray buffers and advance notice of pesticide applications, DeVaney said.

L&I is looking at expanding state pesticide application requirements beyond new federal requirements. Several agricultural groups are seeking more information on how and why, he said.

State bills often come up to

increase buffers and advance notice requirements for pesticide applications when those restrictions are already set by the EPA specific to the product used, he said.

Newer, less toxic pesticides often require more applications, increasing risk but lowering toxicity, DeVaney said.

The governor's push for a carbon tax and possible efforts to raise revenue by removing fuel sales tax and business and occupation tax exemptions for agriculture will be monitored by the association, DeVaney said.

Plant Materials Center hires cover crop researcher

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

ABERDEEN, Idaho — Farmers interested in planting cover crops to improve the health of their soils have a new resource at the local Plant Materials Center, run by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

In recent years, the center has focused on rangeland research. With the hiring of Terron Pickett, 39, as its new agronomist, the center has committed to expanding into crop production trials.

Most of Pickett's time will be devoted to studying ways for Idaho growers to better utilize cover crops, which are planted specifically to improve soil.

The center's manager, Derek Tilley, held the agronomist position, which is the lead research position at the facility, from 2004 until he was promoted in 2014. The position remained vacant until Pickett started on July 24. Tilley said Pickett will "find niches producers can use to raise cover crops without disrupting rotations."

He plans to devote a portion of the center's farmland toward a long-term study to track soil-health changes due to integrating cover crops into a typical southeast Idaho rotation.

"We've got a lot of farmers out there who maybe didn't quite understand what we did, but now we're going to be able to directly reach out to them," Tilley said.

Pickett was raised on a dairy farm in Sanpete County, Utah. After graduating from Utah State University with a bach-



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Terron Pickett, the new agronomist at the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Plant Materials Center in Aberdeen, Idaho, shows cover crop trial plots. Pickett will conduct cover crop research to assist Idaho growers.

elor's degree in crop science, he held his first full-time job with the USDA Agricultural Research Service's Forage and Range Research Lab in Logan, Utah. In 2005, he became a soil conservationist for NRCS in Castle Dale, Utah, where he worked until accepting his current position.

In late August, Pickett planted his first southeast Idaho cover crop trial. The trial is also being conducted at every other U.S. Plant Materials Center. It involves planting replicated plots of various cover crop species — including hairy vetch, crimson clover, red clover, balansa clover, radish, cereal rye, winter pea and black oat — to test which ones perform best in different environments.

Pickett plans to add his own experiments to the trial, including testing the top-per-

forming varieties for protein content and feed value to assist producers who may raise cover crops for grazing. He's also taken biomass samples from his cover crops to measure forage volume.

He'll also work with University of Idaho Extension weed specialist Pam Hutchinson, who will test various chemicals in the spring for their efficacy in terminating cover crops.

Pickett plans to conduct additional trials testing soil moisture retention improvements due to cover crops and soil health of conventionally tilled cover crop plots against no-till cover crop plots.

Another future trial may involve examining species mixtures and seeding rates of multi-species cover crops. He'd like to work with pro-

ducers on trials, too, believing growers are more accepting of results from commercial fields. He hopes to work with a producer in Grace, Idaho, to test cover crops on rangeland and find varieties with good early spring growth for grazing.

Pickett said many producers within the area are using cover crops, but his program has the luxury of learning through trial-and-error and "can afford to have a failed field."

Pickett said funding to help producers raise cover crops is available through the NRCS Soil Health Initiative.

"I think everything starts with soil," Pickett said. "I see (cover crops) becoming more widespread as the benefits are realized here."



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Joel Packham, right, University of Idaho Extension educator in Burley, talks with Steve Harrison, an extension educator in Soda Springs, at the Ag Outlook conference in Burley on Dec. 6.

Hay glut weighs down prices

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

BURLEY, Idaho — A lot of hay is sitting on Idaho farms, which combined with several other factors paints a bleak picture for hay prices in the year ahead, an expert says.

Huge stocks, cheaper substitute feed, weak exports and lower milk prices all put pressure on hay prices, Cassia County Extension Educator Joel Packham told producers at the University of Idaho Ag Outlook.

"We're seeing a whole lot of hay sold at \$80 to \$85 a ton," he said.

That's good for some people but not necessarily for others, he said.

Idaho's average price for alfalfa hay in 2016 is \$114 a ton, down from nearly \$200 in 2014 and about \$170 in 2015. Huge hay stocks now are a result of big purchases in 2014, he said.

May 1 on-farm hay stocks in 2015 jumped 181 percent year over year, from 320,000 tons in 2014 to 900,000 tons. And stocks continued to climb, reaching 950,000 tons on May 1 of this year.

Hay prices were relative-

ly high in 2014, but so were milk and cattle prices. Dairy producers had a lot of money and saved it by putting hay in the yard, making a big commitment to more production, he said.

The value of hay production was pegged at \$1 billion in 2014. But a big percentage of hay stays on the farm; off-farm sales were \$551 million in 2014, he said.

Volatility in milk markets is the reason producers built hay stocks when they had the money, and that's what caused the glut, he said.

In addition, the strengthening of the U.S. dollar turned off the spigot of exports, and that also resulted in lower prices. Idaho's ag exports overall have declined more than 40 percent in the last two years, he said.

Another problem for Idaho alfalfa growers is there are plenty of cheaper substitutes such as straw, corn, barley, triticale, other ensiled grasses, corn silage and hay from other states.

Idaho's corn silage production has seen a huge jump over the last 20 years and is mostly kept within the farm, he said.

Livestock groups seek reform under new administration, Congress

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the Public Lands Council will continue to work on several priority issues as they look ahead to a new Trump administration and a new Congress.

Among the issues are regulations and litigation that inhibit livestock grazing on public lands.

One priority is rolling back restrictive federal sage grouse management plans and giving deference to state management plans.

An attempt failed to insert Language in the National Defense Authorization Act that would prevent implementation of the federal plans where existing state plans were in place, Public Lands Council Executive Director Ethan Lane said in a webinar on priority issues.

Beyond the opposition of



Wikipedia

The West front of the U.S. Capitol. A cattle ranchers' group looks forward to rolling back sage grouse plans.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Armed Forces Committee, there was quite a bit of opposition from environmental groups and "green decoy" sportsmen groups, he said.

PLC and NCBA will work to counteract those groups' messaging on the Hill, he said.

"We're going to continue to press that message that unless the current federal plans

are blocked in order to allow state management to continue, we're going to see increased fuel loads across the West and increased wildfire threat headed into this summer," he said.

The Bureau of Land Management's new Planning 2.0 rule is another priority, with its broad reorientation of the agency's resource management planning process. The agency has stated it wants to

move away from multiple use to better respond to social and environmental change, with no clear definition of what that means, he said.

"BLM is mandated to manage for multiple use and sustained yield, and we will continue to press them to keep an eye on that as they move forward," he said.

The rule contains many objectionable items, including reducing the comment period on proposed plans to as little as 30 days, reducing the role of state directors and local input and eliminating the specific requirements for economic analysis.

"There is simply no other option. Planning 2.0 must be thrown out and we must start over in order to get a result that works for all multiple uses in the West," Lane said.

ESA reform

Reform of the Endangered Species Act is also on the

groups' priority list. At this point there are more than 2,100 species listed, about half of them domestic species. Only about half of those domestic species have functioning recovery plans, he said.

That means livestock producers are dealing with the restrictions of a listing without any path forward or benchmarks for success set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Part of that is due to the litigious environment and the relentless pressure from radical environmental groups through a variety of legal tactics, he said.

"But also there's the simple fact that it's easier for the Fish and Wildlife Service to move away from those pressure points of litigation than to deal with the hard work of recovering those species and delisting them in an orderly fashion," he said.

NCBA and PLC will work

to get more attention paid to the issue and gaining relief from species that are recovered and don't belong on the list anymore, such as gray wolves in the West and grizzly bears in the Yellowstone area, he said.

The groups will also work reform of the National Environmental Policy Act, which guides almost every activity on federal lands.

"It's got to the point where for many of us it feels like you can't swing a gate open west of the 100th meridian without running through a National Environmental Policy Act process before you do so," he said.

State and local roles in the process need to be enhanced, and "stakeholders" need to be further defined. The public and environmental litigants are inserting themselves in the process and are granted a seat at the table equal to livestock producers who hold grazing permits, he said.

Allegations of USDA livestock mistreatment overblown, audit finds

No evidence of systemic problem at research facility, auditors say

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Allegations of livestock mistreatment at a USDA research facility in a New York Times article were largely overblown, according to an internal agency audit.

Last year, the newspaper published a story, "U.S. Research Lab Lets Livestock Suffer in Quest for Profit,"

that led members of Congress to demand an investigation by USDA's Office of Inspector General.

Auditors from OIG examined 33 specific allegations about the USDA's Meat Animal Research Center in Clay Center, Neb., found that most "were inaccurate, lacked sufficient context, or were uncorroborated," according to their recently completed report.

Of the 33 statements, the audit only described seven as "accurate."

For example, the article said that sows at the facility were giving birth to a higher-than-average number of piglets "but hundreds of those

newborns, too frail or crowded to move, are being crushed each year when their mothers roll over."

The investigation found that the number of piglets born per sow at the facility were in line with industry norms, as were piglet mortality rates.

Similarly, the article reported that 6,500 animals have died of starvation at the facility, but the audit found that these were often newborn lambs that had trouble nursing.

"It does not mean that USMARC was not feeding animals appropriately," the audit said.

The article referenced "unsettling side effects" such as

"deformed vaginas" related to the center's research on cattle twins, but the audit found that this problem is common among female twins with male brothers and was not a result of the study.

"Furthermore, multiple veterinarians have confirmed that, other than being sterile, animals with this condition suffer no ill effects or pain and can still enter the food supply," the audit said.

While some of the New York Times' allegations were true — for example, experiments involving surgery and breeding were performed — auditors "did not note evidence indicating a systemic

problem with animal welfare at USMARC."

The auditors note that they tried to contact the New York Times during the investigation, but the newspaper and the reporter who wrote the story refused to be interviewed.

Although the facility didn't have a "systemic problem," auditors said USMARC could improve its oversight and documentation of animal welfare issues.

Auditors criticized the lack of a formal complaint process about animal mistreatment at the facility, noting that the informal system led some employees fearful of retaliation for reporting problems.

In response, the USDA's Agricultural Research Service — which oversees USMARC and other facilities — said it has hired an animal welfare ombudsman who serves as a "confidential, impartial and independent outlet" for complaints.

The Agricultural Research Service also agreed to implement other recommendations made by auditors, except for the proposal to make more information about its research public.

The advantages of releasing additional details "do not outweigh the associated risks from domestic terrorism," the ARS response said.