Thresher Wheat focuses on food safety, grower returns

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — The chief executive officer of a major Eastern Idaho wheat buyer said his company is ramping up production at its local grain cleaning facility, having completed upgrades to double capacity and improve food safety.

Don Wille, CEO of Thresher Artisan Wheat, said his company finished adding a second cleaning line at the Blackfoot plant last April, and hired about five workers to staff it.

Wille said increasing the volume of wheat treated at the facility remains "a work in progress."

"Before, we were maxed out (at the Blackfoot plant), and we couldn't take on any new customers," Wille said. "By adding a second line, we can now go after more customers throughout the country."

Courtesy of Thresher Artisan Wheat

A worker at the Thresher Artisan Wheat facility in Blackfoot, Idaho, runs a wheat cleaning line at the plant, which is seeking to expand production after adding a second line.

Thresher, a subsidiary of the Kansas-based holding company Agspring, was formed in 2014 when Agspring acquired General Mills' Eastern Idaho grain handling infrastructure.

Agspring vice president Bradford Warner said the cleaning line upgrades should enable the facility, built to handle a single customer, to segregate grain by quality and type for many customers. Eventually, Warner envisions grain from his company's sustainable wheat production project may even be segregated.

Last fall, Thresher also underwent inspections to achieve compliance with the federal Food Safety and Modernization Act, as well as food-safety certification through the Safe Quality Food Institute, Wille said. As part of that effort, Thesher changed more than 2,000 pages of procedures, upgraded its metal detection capacity and added X-ray machines for "one more level of screenings" in Blackfoot.

Cathy Wilson, director of research collaboration with the Idaho Wheat Commission, said Wille updated her organization about progress at the plant during a recent board meeting. She said a recent national case of E. coli found in flour demonstrates that wheat is not immune from food-safety challenges.

"As far as food safety and food quality, that is on the radar of a lot of different people, including consumers," Wilson said.

During the past season, Wille said Thresher also implemented a program to help growers determine the optimum time to harvest. He said Thresher has equipment for pre-harvest testing of moisture levels in growers' wheat so they know when to cut to avoid high-moisture grain that could be rejected upon delivery.

"We've got a moisture tester we put in the back of a pickup truck, and we can get to and from the field faster than they can," Wille said. "If they bring all of their equipment to one field and get halfway through the field and it's not dry enough, they've got to move everything to another field."

In February, Wille said Thresher rolled out a new web-based portal, enabling producers to access their contracts, balances and accounting information from home.

Producers previously had to call Thresher and request to have the information faxed or mailed, Willie said. Producers can access the portal through thresherwheat.com, after obtaining a user name and password through the company.

Calif. agronomist brings cautionary tale to Idaho hay growers

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

BURLEY, Idaho — Controlling alfalfa weevil, the most damaging insect pest of alfalfa in the West, is getting tougher in Northern California and that problem could spread throughout the Intermountain West if growers don't take heed.

It's a huge problem in the Scott Valley, especially bad in the last few years, and it's starting to be a problem in Idaho, Steve Orloff, forage agronomist with the University of California told growers at the Idaho Hay and Forage Conference March 2.

High populations of weevils and significant decline in control have been observed, even with multiple applications of insecticides. In addition to high populations, the climate offers an extended time for weevils to develop into adults.

"By and large it's the larvae stage that does the most damage," Orloff said.

But the severe problem with weevils in the last couple of years couldn't be explained by prolonged emergence or high weevil pressure alone, which led to studies of whether weevils had develop resistance to pyrethroid insecticides.

Pyrethroids have been widely used for weevil control because they are cheap and effective.

Growers in Northern California have used them every year for the last 15 years, he said.

To test for resistance, university researchers collected weevils from four conventional fields – where pyrethroids had been used at different intensities — and one organic field, where pyrethroids had never been used.

Alfalfa shoots were dipped in five different pyrethroid solutions and placed in sample cups to which weevils from the various fields were added.

The best control was seen with the weevils from the organic field, where mortality rates ranged from 62 percent at one-fourth of the recommended application of pyrethroid to 92 percent at the recommended rate.

Mortality at the standard-use rate in the weevils from conventional fields ranged from just 3 percent to 15 percent. Even at four times the recommended rate, weevil control was 23 percent in three fields and 35 percent in one.

"So we have a resistant population to pyrethroids," Orloff said.

Over time, that could build to a population that is all resistant, he said.

The research results mean growers in the Scott Valley must rotate to other insecticides and not use pyrethroids.

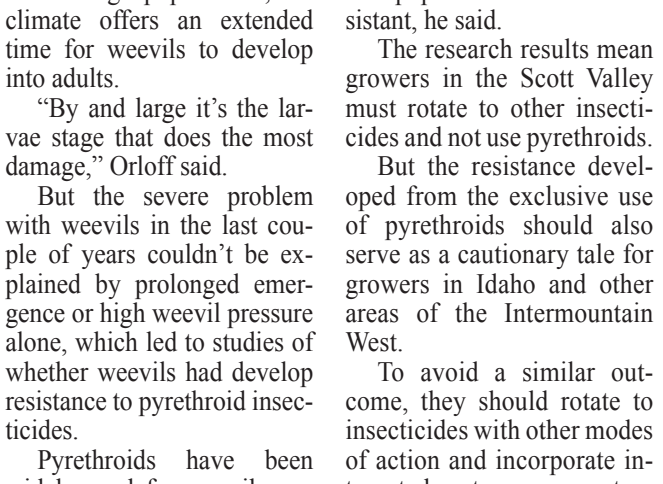
But the resistance developed from the exclusive use of pyrethroids should also serve as a cautionary tale for growers in Idaho and other areas of the Intermountain West.

To avoid a similar outcome, they should rotate to insecticides with other modes of action and incorporate integrated pest management.

"The key is don't use the same insecticide over and over and over," he said.

The problem is there aren't many good alternatives at this point. Alfalfa isn't a big enough market to grab the attention of insecticide companies, so insecticides approved for alfalfa are spillovers from other crops, he said.

Hopefully there will be some new insecticides in the future to control alfalfa weevils, he said.



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Steve Orloff, extension forage agronomist with the University of California, talks about insecticide resistance in alfalfa weevils during the Idaho Hay and Forage Conference in Burley on March 2.

Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

Wheat is harvested near Waterville, Wash., last August. A new multi-year study predicts that inland Pacific Northwest wheat crops will do better than first thought as climate change occurs in the coming century.

Wheat will do better than assumed as climate changes, study predicts

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Dryland wheat crops will do better than researchers originally assumed as the climate changes, according to a scientist who took part in a $20 million, six-year regional study of cereal crop production systems.

Climate models for the inland Pacific Northwest call for warmer weather with drier summers and slightly wetter winters, according to Claudio Stockle, Washington State University professor of biological systems engineering. He was among 279 scientists at WSU, the University of Idaho and Oregon State University who took part in the recently completed Regional Approaches to Climate Change for Pacific Northwest Agriculture project, known by the acronym REACCH.

Such conditions would likely decrease yields, especially for spring cereal crops, Stockle wrote in his study summary.

"However, the rising levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide that are driving global warming also have direct beneficial effects on crops, promoting crop growth and improving water-use efficiency," he wrote. "This effect, sometimes referred to as 'CO2 fertilization,' might mean that the future of dryland agriculture is better than it is assumed to be when considering climate warming alone."

Higher winter and spring temperatures allow for earlier planting and will benefit winter crop growth, according to Stockle's study. Earlier maturity of winter and spring crops would help them survive "the more extreme and damaging" summer heat.

Stockle's study compared low and high levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide to baseline crop yields from 1979 to 2010.

Wheat yields in lower levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide and warming were projected to have small and steady increases until the end of the century.

At higher carbon dioxide levels, wheat yields were projected to increase to mid-century and then decline by the end of the century, to levels similar to the baseline, according to Stockle's report, which was one of dozens of studies undertaken.

REACCH director Sanford Eigenbrode said the project was designed to enhance the sustainability of cereal production systems in the inland Pacific Northwest.

He emphasized collaboration among researchers. Those collaborations will continue, including a meeting in March 2018 to provide an update on research still to be completed.

Eigenbrode compared the cost of a single $20 million project such as REACCH to the cost of 20 $1 million individual USDA-funded projects or 40 $500,000 projects all working on their own.

"We can't claim necessarily to have discovered things that would never have been discovered without REACCH, but we can claim we have understood the system as a whole in a way that never could have been accomplished," he said.

Genesee, Idaho, farmer Eric Odberg said his involvement in the project supported his decision to use no-till production.

"We've had greater extremes in our weather over my 25-year farming career," he said. "The farming tactic that I've deployed has allowed my farm to weather those extremes better, being able to get by with less moisture and have less fertilizer where I don't need it."

A book, "Advances in Dryland Farming in the Pacific Northwest," is slated for publication this year. Eigenbrode intends the 11-chapter book to be "the go-to place for information," printed and online, for cereal farmers.

"It should be quite useful by anyone, regardless of their views, positions or level of concern about climate change," he said.

A 2012 REACCH survey found that 80 percent of growers agreed that they have observed weather patterns changing in their lifetime, but only 39 percent agreed that the average global temperature is increasing.

Most farmers — about 79 percent — do not believe human activity is the primary cause of climate change. The public is roughly 42 percent likely to believe climate change is human-caused and not a natural occurrence. Nine hundred producers participated in the survey.

Eigenbrode said the project was not intended to change farmers' minds. If it was, he said, he would not have been involved in it.

"We're about doing good science for good farming," he said.

REACCH study yields discoveries

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Sanford Eigenbrode, a University of Idaho entomologist and director of the Regional Approaches to Climate Change for Pacific Northwest Agriculture project, known as REACCH, said some of the discoveries made by researchers include:

- The region's cereal cropping system is resilient to climate change and has the ability to continue to be profitable.
- Better data on no-till farming benefits.
- New, more precise measurement methods.
- Regional earthworm distribution.
- The discovery of a new aphid, which will be added to pest alerts.
- Bare-patch rhizoctonia thrives in dry conditions, which was previously unknown to researchers, since other pathogens prefer wet conditions.
- Better precision nitrogen management.
- Improved rotational cropping systems, including triticale, winter canola and winter legumes.
- Better water conservation in the driest parts of the region.
- New climate-based tools to help growers make decisions.

The project was funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. More than 200 researchers from UI, Washington State University, Oregon State University and the USDA Agricultural Research Service worked on the project.

— Matthew Weaver

Both dyed diesel bills run out of fuel in Idaho Legislature

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Two bills dealing with dyed diesel, which is used heavily in farming, were introduced during the 2017 Idaho legislative session and both are now dead.

A bill that would have created a dyed fuel enforcement program in Idaho has been defeated despite the support of most of Idaho's main farm groups.

The Senate Transportation Committee earlier in the session voted to send the bill to the full Senate with a "do-pass" recommendation.

But after a lengthy debate on the Senate floor, Senate Bill 1072 was killed on a 26-8 vote.

Dyed fuel is tinted red so it can easily be identified. It is exempt from state and federal diesel taxes because it is for off-road use only.

It is used heavily in agriculture, construction, mining and logging. Idaho currently has no dyed fuel enforcement program.

Sen. Steve Bair, a retired farmer from Blackfoot who spoke against the bill, told Capital Press he disagreed with the bill's inference that farmers and others eligible to use the fuel are misusing it.

"The bill presumes that farmers are cheating and I don't think that's a correct assumption, nor do I think it's fair," Bair said.

The bill's sponsor, Sen. Bert Brackett, a Republican rancher from Rogerson, sent a letter to Food Producers of Idaho March 6 thanking its members for their support.

FPI represents most of Idaho's main farm groups.

"I have said many times that I don't believe there is widespread illegal use of dyed diesel in production agriculture," Brackett stated.

However, he added, there is a public perception that abuse of dyed diesel is occurring.

"We in agriculture can ignore the situation or be defensive, but until we are willing to take a proactive approach, our image is needlessly suspect," he said.

Various estimates place the amount of forgone taxes to the state because of alleged misuse of dyed fuel at between $3 million and $11 million.

Sen. Jim Rice, R-Caldwell, told Capital Press that it would take about 500,000 to 1.5 million vehicle fill-ups to arrive at those totals.