Endangered Klamath Basin suckers

Lost River sucker

Binomial name: Deltistes luxatus

Appearance: Can reach one meter in length. Long snout with small hump on top. Dark on back and sides with whitish or yellowish underbelly.

Lifespan: More than 40 years

Preferred habitat: Deep lakes and pools and fast currents. Spawns in tributary streams and springs with gravelly bottoms.

Shortnose sucker

Binomial name: Chasmistes brevirostris

Appearance: Up to half a meter in length. Large head and thin, fleshy lips. Lower lip is notched.

Lifespan: More than 30 years

Preferred habitat: Turbid, shallow lakes but spawns in tributary streams and springs.

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Capital Press graphic

Judge dismisses grazing lawsuit

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A federal judge has rejected environmentalist arguments that cattle grazing has unlawfully harmed endangered sucker fish in Oregon's Fremont-Winema National Forest.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Mark Clarke threw out a lawsuit by three environmental groups — Oregon Wild, Friends of Living Oregon Waters and the Western Watersheds Project — which claimed that grazing was unlawfully authorized on eight allotments in the Lost River watershed.

The plaintiffs accused the U.S. Forest Service of "ignoring widespread evidence of riparian problems" that adversely affected the Lost River sucker and shortnose sucker, which are federally protected under the Endangered Species Act.

However, the judge has ruled that plaintiffs failed to prove that grazing degraded streams in violation of the National Forest Management Act.

Conditions have improved in many riparian areas despite continued grazing while recovery trends are "not significantly different" among sites that are grazed and those that are not, Clarke said.

"This would tend to indicate grazing is not the reason for any failure to attain (riparian management objectives) in streams found on the challenged allotments," he said.

While the environmental groups have pointed to evidence of deterioration along portions of some creeks, they haven't shown "watershed level" and "landscape-scale" failures to live up to fish-recovery objectives, Clarke said.

The "creek-specific observations" by environmental groups aren't enough to "successfully rebut" the Forest Service's interpretation of the data, he said.

"Finally, many of the creek assessments plaintiffs point to as evidence of a failure to attain (riparian management objectives) actually show improving or stable trends," the judge said.

The Forest Service's decision to authorize grazing on the eight allotments was based on "reasonably gathered and evaluated data" related to fish recovery strategies mandated under the National Forest Management Act, he said.

The judge's decision reinforces the idea that the Forest Service must strive toward the goals set by the inland fish strategy for national forests, rather than meet those standards instantaneously, said Scott Horngren, an attorney with the Western Resources Legal Center who represented ranchers who intervened in the case.

Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Oregon State University researcher Amanda Vance evaluated table grape varieties that small farmers might want to grow.

Table grape options under study

OSU researcher weighs varieties that grow well in Willamette Valley

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

AURORA — Oregon knows wine grapes. The vineyards growing Pinot noir and multiple other varieties have won justifiable acclaim, as the success of the state's wine industry attests.

But work done at Oregon State University's research station in Aurora may help open an opportunity for growing table grapes, the sweet snackers that now come piling into grocery stores from California, Mexico and Chile.

Amanda Vance, a faculty research assistant, spent three years evaluating cultivars planted at OSU's North Willamette Research and Extension Center, or NWREC. Her work, which has been accepted for scholarly publication, identified several varieties that might be suitable for commercial growing in the Willamette Valley.

Not that Oregon is suddenly going to be shipping truckloads of Thompson Seedless out of state. Instead, Vance said table grapes might increasingly become part of what small producers take to farmers' markets or sell at roadside stands.

"I think there's good potential for small, diverse farms to add them into the mix," she said. "We'll probably not grow them on a large scale."

Vance's research came about partly by happenstance. University berry and fruit breeders sometimes informally share their work with counterparts at other institutions, who grow them as a courtesy to see how they do in other regions, or with an eye to future research of their own.

OSU's North Willamette center has 41 cultivars on a one-third-acre demonstration plot, including several selections from Cornell University. In 2006, NWREC accepted new table grape cultivars from John R. Clark, a noted University of Arkansas plant breeder and horticulture professor.

Clark wanted to test his new selections in the Willamette Valley, and afterward came to visit and taste the grapes, but they hadn't been evaluated until Vance began work on them in 2014.

Vance has worked four years at NWREC, where she manages research fields and does day-to-day data collection and analysis. She has a background in viticulture, however, and the grapes intrigued her. She selected 13 cultivars to study, eventually eliminating three of them because they weren't working out.

Vance said the most promising of the cultivars are Neptune, a green grape from Arkansas with high yields year after year; Canadice, a smaller red grape from Cornell with good flavor and uniform clusters. The best of the newer varieties from Clark is called A2932. It's a green grape with nice sized fruit, Vance said, and it will be named and propagated over the next year or so. Vance is doing a mini-trial this year with A2932, comparing cane pruning to spur pruning methods.

Two other promising Arkansas cultivars, Joy and Faith, are purple grapes with variable size in clusters, but good yields.

Vance said the research does not include an economic analysis, but people thinking about growing table grapes will find information such as yield and cluster weight when the study is published. OSU Extension provides general information on growing grapes, and the study results will be noted in OSU's small farm newsletter, Vance said.

She said table grapes do well in colder climates than the Willamette Valley, including New York and Michigan, and valley farmers may find a spot for them.

"People are always looking to the mix of what they can do," she said.

Fresh domestic spud sales make gains

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

John O'Connell/Capital Press

Potatoes are loaded after being harvested in Eastern Idaho in August of 2016. Potatoes USA officials are hopeful that recent Neilsen Perishables Group data will be the start of a trend of improved fresh domestic potato sales.

DENVER — New consumer data suggest the U.S. potato industry may finally be making progress in its effort to reverse a longterm trend of gradually declining domestic fresh potato sales.

Domestic retail spending on fresh potatoes posted monthly gains from the prior year throughout the six-month period ending in December, which is the most recent month with complete data available through the Nielsen Perishables Group.

Ross Johnson, retail global marketing manager for Potatoes USA, said December was also the first month in which he's witnessed potato sales by volume increase from the previous year.

According to the Nielsen data, retailers sold more than 278 million pounds of fresh potatoes during December 2016, up 1.7 percent from December 2015. Retail prices, at 63 cents per pound, were a penny higher. The value of fresh sales, at about $176.6 million, was up 3.6 percent.

"It's exciting to finally see the report where we can deliver some positive news to the industry," Johnson said.

Johnson said increasing sales of bags weighing more than 10 pounds and strong value-added product sales have driven increases in the fresh category. More than 12.5 million pounds of spuds were sold during the month in greater than 10-pound bags, up 6.4 percent. Johnson attributes the gains to strong sales in warehouse stores that specialize in large volume.

"What I'm hearing throughout the industry is that Costco and Sam's Club are not only increasing their member base, but they're also doing extremely well in larger package sizes," Johnson said.

In the value-added fresh category, December sales of petite potatoes, at nearly 800,000 pounds, were up more than 53 percent.

Seth Pemsler, vice president of retail and international programs with Idaho Potato Commission, said the reported gains are consistent with records of strong fresh potato shipments that have been well ahead of the prior year in his state.

Potatoes USA Chief Marketing Officer John Toaspern acknowledged a single month of data doesn't constitute a trend, but he believes consumer perceptions about spuds are improving, and people are trying new, creative ways to prepare them.

"I think we've seen a bit of a turn in the tide in terms of perceptions (about potatoes) in the nutrition community," Toaspern said.

Despite a strong dollar, Toaspern anticipates fresh and frozen potato exports will both be up when the marketing year ends on June 30.

Nonetheless, potato growers haven't noticed improvements in their returns. Jeff Harper, a Mountain Home, Idaho, grower, said he'll feed fresh spuds produced above his processing contract to cattle.

American Falls grower Jim Tiede believes the high-quality 2016 potato crop has increased the percentage of fresh spuds that can be packaged for sale to consumers, thereby driving down prices.