

Idaho-Oregon industry changes how it promotes bulb onions

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

NYSSA, Ore. — The onion growing industry in Eastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho has revamped how it promotes the 1.5 billion pounds of Spanish big bulb onions grown here each year.

Promotion and marketing of those onions has traditionally fallen mostly to the Idaho-Eastern Oregon Onion Committee, which administers the federal marketing order that covers this region.

But the committee in 2015 opted to cut the region's onion assessment in half, sharply reduce its promotion budget and let onion shippers use the resulting savings, if they chose, to do more of their own direct promotions and marketing.

The assessment was trimmed from 10 cents for each 100 pounds of onions



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

The Idaho-Oregon onion industry has revamped how it promotes the 1.5 billion pounds of Spanish big bulb onions produced here each year.

produced to 5 cents.

Growers pay 60 percent of that assessment and handlers the rest.

The assessment fee cut did

not impact the committee's research and export budgets.

But the IEIOC slashed the budget for its promotion committee from \$635,000

to \$250,000.

The 300 growers and 30 onion shippers in the region were left with the option of using the savings realized from the assessment reduction to do their own marketing.

The industry's customer base has consolidated heavily over the years and because customer lists are much shorter now, it makes sense for individual shippers to more aggressively go after customers themselves, said promotions committee board member Grant Kitamura.

"This gives people more money to promote their own business," said Kitamura, general manager of Murakami Produce in Ontario, Ore.

At the same time, the IEIOC still maintains a strong industry presence, including at trade shows and industry events, and continues to promote the famous Span-

ish bulb onions grown here as a regional brand.

The committee spent \$61,000 on advertising last year, as well as \$7,000 to print 1,000 glossy shippers directories.

"We think we've been successful in maintaining our visibility in the industry (even) with the reduced budget," Kitamura said.

The promotions committee has also turned to the internet and social media more, a tactic designed to reach millennials.

"We are trying to reach out to the next generation of consumers and customers," Kitamura said.

Malheur County farmer Paul Skeen, a member of the promotions committee board, believes reducing the committee's budget and allowing shippers and growers to use the savings to do more of their

own marketing was a wise move.

"I think we're still getting the bang for our buck," he said of the committee's reduced budget. "We just cut the frills out and went with what's working."

Other industry members contacted by Capital Press agreed.

"We're in favor of that decision and feel it's working well for our company and our growers," said John Wong, president of Champion Produce in Parma, Idaho.

Shay Myers, general manager of Owyhee Produce in Nyssa, Ore., was skeptical of the move at first because he worried having shippers do their own promotions and marketing could fragment the industry.

But he has since changed his mind and now believes the new direction is working well.

Bill would authorize GMO trespass lawsuits against plant patent holders

Genetic technology companies would be liable for any crop damages

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — New lawsuits over trespass by genetically engineered crops would be authorized in Oregon under legislation that would hold biotech patent holders liable for damages.

Supporters of House Bill 2739 say it's a common sense strategy to remedy problems caused by genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, similar to consumer lawsuits over defective products.

"This is not a wild legal grab. We will not be compensated for our angst. We will only be compensated for provable legal damages," said Sandra Bishop of the Our Family Farms Coalition, which supports HB 2739.

Jerry Erstrom, a Malheur County farmer, said he supports the bill even though he's planted genetically engineered corn on his property.

"If you do something that messes up my livelihood, you should be held accountable for it," Erstrom said at a March 16 hearing of the House Judiciary Committee.

Creeping bentgrass that's genetically engineered to tolerate glyphosate herbicides escaped control in Eastern Oregon, and the crop's patent holder should be responsible for control costs as it spreads, he said.

"It's coming to the Willamette Valley. Say what you want, it's going to be here," Erstrom said.

Proponents of HB 2739 say there's nothing new about holding companies liable for their products hurting people or property, but organic and conventional farmers must currently bear the financial burden from GMO crop contamination alone.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Malheur County farmer Jerry Erstrom points out a genetically engineered creeping bentgrass plant June 14, 2016, on an irrigation ditch bank near Ontario, Ore. Erstrom testified March 16 in favor of legislation in Oregon that would allow farmers whose crops are damaged by GMOs to sue patent holders for damages.

"We're not coming to you from a level playing field. Harm is only coming one way," said Amy van Saun, legal fellow with the Center for Food Safety, which supports the bill.

Supporters say the legal mechanism of HB 2739 is simple and fair because the liability rests with companies that profit from GMO patents.

Complicated searches for a culprit won't be necessary, since biotech traits can be determined with genetic tests, said Elise Higley, director of the Our Family Farms Coalition.

"It's super easy to track it back to who is responsible," Higley said.

Opponents of the bill argue that pollination among related crops isn't limited to GMOs, but neighboring farmers have long found practical ways to avoid unwanted crosses.

"It's one of the greatest risks I face, but it's a manageable risk," said Kevin Richards, who grows seeds and other crops near Madras, Ore.

Under a provision in HB 2739, plaintiffs are entitled to triple the amount of economic damages caused by the unwanted presence of GMOs, which is clearly meant to be punitive, according to the bill's detractors.

"It would single out and

stigmatize biotech patents," said Barry Bushue, president of the Oregon Farm Bureau.

Critics also questioned the logic of making patent holders liable for unauthorized GMOs, since the problem may be caused by irrespons-

ble practices of neighboring landowners or factors beyond human control, like birds. "They sell the seed but they have no control once that happens," said Roger Beyer, a lobbyist for the Oregon Seed Council and other crop groups.

Apart from the immediate impacts of the bill, imposing new liability on patent holders may discourage seed companies from offering innovative products in Oregon, said Scott Dahlman, policy director of the Oregonians for Food and Shelter agribusiness group.

If companies face the threat of additional lawsuits, "they will reconsider whether they sell things here," Dahlman said.

Pete Postlewait, a farmer near Canby, Ore., said he's disturbed by the precedent of punishing patent holders for the actions of end users, since that logic could be extended to non-GMO cross-pollination.

New FDA nutrition label pleases potato industry

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

DENVER — Officials of Potatoes USA say new federal Food and Drug Administration guidance adding potassium to nutrition labels should benefit the fresh potato industry.

Potatoes USA Chief Marketing Officer John Toasperm explained that potatoes are among the richest sources of potassium among fruits and vegetables.

Potatoes USA updated its label to meet the FDA requirements in the fall and recently revised the label again based on adjustments FDA made to the recommended daily value of key nutrients.

According to the latest version of the fresh potato label, a 5.2-ounce serving of fresh potatoes contains 15 percent of the recommended daily value of potassium. "Certainly you hear plenty of press around the fact that people are paying more attention to nutrition labels," Toasperm said. "It's more important than it used to be."

Toasperm said the updated

Nutrition Facts	
Serving size	1 potato (148g/5.2oz)
Amount per serving	
Calories	110
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 0g	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 0mg	0%
Total Carbohydrate 26g	9%
Dietary Fiber 2g	7%
Total Sugars 1g	
Includes 0g Added Sugars	0%
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 0mcg	0%
Calcium 20mg	2%
Iron 1.1mg	6%
Potassium 620mg	15%
Vitamin C 27mg	30%
Vitamin B ₆ 0.2mg	10%

*The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Courtesy of Potatoes USA

The updated potato nutrition label.

label won't be required on fresh potato bags until July 26, 2018, for large food manufacturers, and manufacturers making less than \$10 million in annual food sales will have an additional year to comply. His organization is spreading word of the revisions now because many fresh potato shippers print their bags more than a year in advance.

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