

USDA sets specialty crop block grant amounts

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho, California and Washington will receive a little less funding from USDA this year for their specialty crop block grant programs while Oregon will receive a little more.

The annual program is funded by USDA through the Farm Bill. States use the money to fund projects that improve the competitiveness of specialty crops, which include fruits and vegetables, tree nuts and fried fruits and horticulture and nursery crops.

The USDA will provide \$60 million in specialty crop grant funding to states this year, down from \$62.5 mil-

lion in 2016.

The amount individual states receive from USDA is based on a formula that includes how much specialty crop acreage that state has as well as total farm cash receipts from that sector.

For 2017, a state's farm gate receipts are based on calendar year 2015 totals and farm cash receipts in many states dropped significantly that year.

Acreage is based on the 2012 Census of Agriculture data.

Idaho will receive \$1.76 million in 2017, down from \$1.9 million the previous two years. Washington will receive \$4.1 million, down from \$4.3 million last year, and

California will receive \$19.2 million, down from \$22.4 million last year.

Oregon will get \$1.72 million in 2017, up from \$1.61 million last year.

Western states fare well when it comes to the national rankings for specialty crop grant funding.

California ranks an unchallenged No. 1, Washington is No. 2, Idaho ranks No. 6 and Oregon is No. 7.

Florida (No. 3, \$3.8 million), North Dakota (No. 4, \$2.5 million) and Michigan (No. 5, \$1.8 million) round out the top seven.

Idaho State Department of Agriculture officials hope to receive more applications this year seeking funding from the

department's specialty crop block grant program.

The ISDA last year received 18 requests for funding from 14 different entities. That was the fewest applications since 2011.

Program officials did more outreach across the state over the past year to educate the state's many specialty crop industries about the program, said Eric Boyington, who manages the ISDA program.

"We're hoping to get a lot more applications this year," Boyington said. "We want to hopefully get different types of organizations to apply that haven't in the past. We wanted to have applicants come from other areas of the state

as well."

The deadline to submit applications in Idaho is April 14 and applications only have to be postmarked before that date to be accepted. For more information, contact Boyington at (208)332-8537 or eric.boyington@isda.idaho.gov

Washington received 85 initial proposals before that state's first deadline, said Washington State Department of Agriculture Communications Director Hector Castro.

Of those, 50 applicants were invited to submit complete proposals for consideration by an April 20 deadline.

The deadline to submit grant proposals in Oregon and California's has passed.

Limagrain barley exported from PNW to South Africa

Company sends 12 tons of LCS Genie

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

South African farmers will soon start growing and using barley from Idaho for malting.

Limagrain Cereal Seeds sent 12 tons of LCS Genie — 11 tons of commercial-grade seed and 1 ton of breeder seed — to be used to develop stock for future years, said Frank Curtis, chief operating officer.

SAB Miller in South Africa heard about the variety through U.S. contacts, received samples from Limagrain's European owners and requested seed.

Limagrain Europe owns the variety. Limagrain Cereal Seeds has a license to market it in the U.S. and Canada.

Licensing will be through the Limagrain Europe office, Curtis said.

LCS Genie fits SAB Miller's quality requirements.

"It's intermediate between the typical eastern European pilsner types and the stronger-enzyme American adjunct types," he said. "It falls roughly in the middle and gives the maltster a lot of flexibility with different types of malt he can make. That's very attractive to the craft brewing market."

SAB Miller is the largest brewery in South Africa, Curtis said.

Curtis said a situation where a foreign country is interested in a U.S. variety occurs every five to 10 years. In the past, Limagrain Cereal Seeds has sent varieties to India, Australia and South Africa, he said.

Importing seed to South Africa required permitting, certification that the shipment was free of disease and noxious weeds and clear cargo marking for customs.

Most countries only allow import on sterile pallets or plastic-disposable pallets to avoid insects, Curtis said.

The interest provides an additional market for LCS Genie, he said.

In partnership with Limagrain, Kevin Whittaker, seed manager for CHS Primeland in Lewiston, Idaho, brought the variety from Europe to the U.S. in 2014.

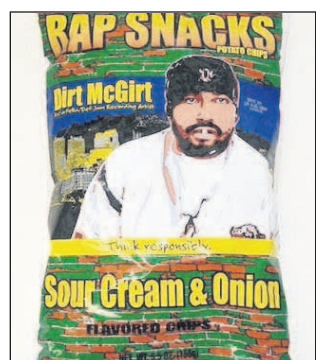
He also provided the barley for shipment to South Africa.

Small brewers like the malt made with LCS Genie, Whittaker said.

"This barley's high-yielding, it's passed all the malt tests here in the U.S.," he said. "It yields up with the feed barleys and sometimes better."

Whittaker sees additional room for growth for the variety in the PNW.

LCS Genie is grown in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Colorado and Montana. It's being tested in several other states.



Courtesy of Rap Snacks
Rap Snacks potato chips feature rap artists on every bag.

Potato chip brand capitalizes on rap music's popularity

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

Don't tell James "Fly" Lindsay that potatoes are a humble vegetable.

For 21 years, the Atlanta-based founder of Rap Snacks potato chips has melded "the culture of hip hop with the snack food industry."

His unique brand of potato chips features novel flavor combinations typifying the personalities of famous rap music artists, who are featured on the bags.

"Potatoes, I've been eating them for so long," Lindsay said. "It's one of the favorite vegetables in our country, and I think it truly helps the acceptance of the product because everybody loves potato chips."

Though his brand has been around for several years, he said only recently have his sales taken off, due largely to the tendency of social media oddities to go "viral." Lindsay said he's updated his packaging and his slate of artists, and he's emphasized internet marketing.

Lindsay said his brand has moved beyond the urban "mom and pop" stores into the suburbs, spanning from the East Coast to the Southwest.

"We're probably doing 20 truckloads a week of product," Lindsay said.

Soon, Lindsay plans to offer codes on bags to access unreleased music by his artists. Initially, a character Lindsay invented named MC Potato was featured on Rap Snacks bags. Nowadays, his bags show the likenesses of well-known rap musicians.

His most recent flavor, New York deli cheddar, features the rapper Fabolous. Lindsay explained cheddar is fitting because Fabolous "loves his money." Honey jalapeno Rap Snacks recognize both the spicy and sweeter sides of rapper Fetty Wap. The most popular flavor — sour cream with a dab of ranch — celebrates a hip hop dance move known as dabbing and features the entertainer Migos.

Lindsay said he plans to soon expand into marketing cheese curls and mango-cheddar popcorn. But Idaho Potato Commission President and CEO Frank Muir is glad Lindsay started with potato chips.

"To me, trying to get potatoes, particularly Idaho potatoes, into the current with different lifestyles is good," Muir said. "Anything that portrays potatoes in a cool light is a good thing."

Power utility argues Oregon giant cane bills unnecessary

Portland General Electric is suspending experiments with weedy crop

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Utility companies that grow a potentially invasive biomass energy crop would be on the hook for its eradication costs under a bill proposed in Oregon.

Due to worries about the weediness of Arundo donax, or giant cane, Senate Bill 789 would require public utilities to post a surety bond of at least \$1 million to cover removal efforts.

However, the only company currently affected by the proposal, Portland General Electric, argues the measure is unnecessary because it's soon abandoning experiments with the crop.

PGE has been evaluating giant cane as an alternative feedstock for its power plant near Boardman, Ore., which must stop burning coal in 2020.

The Native Plant Society of Oregon wants state lawmakers to pass SB 789 because giant cane poses an "existential threat to all streamside habitats" along the Columbia river, said Billy Don Robinson, legislative committee chairman for the group.

"It simply crowds out every other plant in these streamside habitats," he said during a March 29 legislative hearing.

Under another proposal the group supports, Senate Bill 790, Oregon State University would be required to conduct a study of the risks associated with giant cane and potential safeguards for producing it.

Unlike previous research on the plant, the OSU study would examine the hazards associated with genetically enhanced varieties, said Judi



Courtesy of Frank Callahan, Native Plant Society
Giant cane grows near the Talent area of Oregon in this 2012 photo. A bill before the Oregon legislature would require a surety bond for anyone who grows the plant.

Sanders, past president of the Native Plant Society of Oregon.

In California, eradication costs for the weed range from \$4,700 to \$64,000 per acre, which shouldn't be borne by taxpayers if cultivated giant cane escapes fields in Oregon, she said.

"If there's no mess, it's not much of an issue," she said.

Giant cane is already making its way north from California, but PGE's experiments near Boardman have introduced a new point of risk, said Robinson.

There are also 48 patents pending that would make the crop more cold-hardy, drought-tolerant and salt-tolerant, he said. "It scares me."

Right now, though, PGE is winding down its cultivation of giant cane, said

Brendan McCarthy, the company's state environmental policy manager.

The company grew nearly 100 acres of the crop at one point but is now down to about 30 acres, with the remaining plants to be eradicated after the 2017 growing season, he said.

Giant cane and other forms of biomass proved more than twice as expensive as needed to operate the power plant profitably, McCarthy said. "It really came down to cost."

With less than four years before the company would have to convert the facility to biomass, PGE doesn't have enough time to establish a biomass supply chain, McCarthy said.

PGE considered using beetle-damaged wood from national forests, but that

wouldn't be a sustainable feedstock, he said.

Juniper removed from Oregon's rangelands is too dispersed to economically collect and transport, while other dedicated biomass crops have risks similar to giant cane, McCarthy said.

"Things that grow really well may very well be invasive," he said.

While PGE is suspending its biomass research, representatives of the Native Plant Society of Oregon said they want SB 789 amended to impose the surety bond requirement on other potential giant cane growers, not just public utilities.

Aside from biomass, companies may want to produce the crop for building products, paper fiber and livestock feed, said Robinson.

\$5.6M for Oregon farm-to-school funding passes key committee

Lawmakers also consider increasing tax credit for crop donations

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — A bill directing \$5.6 million to Oregon's farm-to-school food program has won unanimous approval from the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Now, House Bill 2038 must compete against other spending bills in the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, which is prioritizing requests for funding in the next biennium amid a projected state budget deficit of \$1.6 billion.

The bill would provide



Oregon Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem.

nearly \$4.6 million for grants to help school districts buy foods grown and processed in Oregon and more than \$900,000 for food-, garden- and agriculture-based education.

The committee's chairman, Brian Clem, D-Salem, noted that existing farm-to-school funding would be eliminated under the 2017-2019 budget recommended by Gov. Kate Brown and halved under the proposal by the co-chairs of

the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

Lawmakers have been advised to be selective in their requests for funding to the Ways and Means Committee, given budget constraints, he said.

If farm-to-school funding is significantly reduced from the amount requested in HB 2039, Clem recommended that the program revert to a competitive grant system.

Currently, all school districts receive non-competitive grants to buy Oregon food products, but this approach wouldn't provide enough incentive if each received only a small amount of money, he said.

"No one school district will find that worth doing," he said.

The history of Oregon's farm-to-school program goes back a decade, when lawmakers created the position of a

farm-to-school coordinator in 2007.

A competitive grant pilot program armed with \$200,000 was created in 2011, with funding expanded to \$1.2 million in 2013. During the 2015 legislative session, another \$3.3 million was added to the program and grants for food purchases were made non-competitive.

Aside from voting to approve HB 2038 during its April 4 meeting, the House Agriculture Committee also considered another bill that would increase tax credits for farmers who donate crops to food banks and similar institutions.

Under House Bill 3041, the tax credit would increase from 15 percent to 25 percent of the value of crops donated.

Jenny Dresler, state public policy director for the Oregon Farm Bureau, said the organi-

zation understands Oregon's tight budget situation.

If resources are available, though, lawmakers should support the bill because it would help farmers overcome financial barriers to donating crops, Dresler said.

Tax Fairness Oregon, a group that opposes tax breaks to preserve state revenues, doesn't believe the tax credit increase is justified, said Jody Wiser, its founder.

"Why are we doing it? We don't have any statistical analysis to show the need is there," she said.

Restaurants and grocery stores also donate food, but most content themselves with a deduction to their taxable income, rather than a tax credit, Wiser said.

"It's hard to explain why farmers should be treated so differently than other food donors," she said.