

WSDA reports increase in cropland acreage

Winegrape acreage up

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Farmers have added more than 257,000 acres of cropland in Washington in the past eight years, according to the Department of Agriculture, keeping the state on pace to have 7.35 million acres in plant production by the end of 2020.

Cropland acres grew on both sides of the Cascades, through the percentage increase was much higher in Western Washington, according to a presentation by WSDA Director Derek Sandison at a recent meeting of Results Washington.

A group that includes Gov. Jay Inslee and several agency directors meet periodically to review progress in meeting state objectives. The goals include maintaining the state's farmlands in the face of population growth.

Among individual crops



Courtesy of Results Washington

Washington Agriculture Director Derek Sandison gives a presentation March 29 at a Results Washington meeting in Olympia on the growth of cropland. The state has added more than 257,000 acres of cropland in the past eight years, according to WSDA.

noted in Sandison's report, winegrapes stood out. Acres of vineyards increased by 58 percent between 2008 and 2016 to 56,883 acres from 35,951 acres.

Acres of Washington's No. 1 crop, apples, declined slightly to 180,787 acres from 184,094 acres.

In the past eight years, cropland in Eastern Washington grew by 175,881 acres to

about 7 million, a 2.5 percent increase.

Sandison singled out about 4,000 acres of cropland added in the Red Mountain area in Benton County, including 1,600 acres in winegrapes.

In Western Washington, cropland grew by 81,894 acres to about 290,000 acres, or by 39 percent.

Statewide, the increase

was from 7 million acres to 7.32 million acres, or 3.6 percent.

Some 96 percent of the state's cropland is east of the Cascades. Cropland does not include pastures or shellfish beds.

Sandison also highlighted the loss of cropland in places, such as near Lake Chelan in Central Washington.

"The statewide numbers mask what's happening in specific areas, like this," he said. "When we evaluate the viability of cropland through a statewide lens, we get a far different picture than if we evaluate it through a local lens."

"We do continue to be concerned about conversion of cropland to urban, suburban and large-lot rural development," he said. "Once these conversions are made, it's highly unlikely those lands ever return to agriculture."

While the state has set a goal to maintain farmland, it's also pursued a policy of buying open space, including grazing lands and farmland, for wildlife habitat and recreation.

Judge: No permit required for predator hunting derby

Environmentalists claimed U.S. Forest Service violated federal law

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

A predator hunting "derby" in Idaho didn't require a permit from federal officials despite the use of a national forest, according to a federal judge.

Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge Ronald Bush has ruled that federal environmental law doesn't compel the U.S. Forest Service to issue a permit or study the impacts of the derby, in which hunters competed to kill wolves, coyotes and other predators.

"The derby did involve hunting, and possibly hunting on the forest, but that hunting was a legal activity each of the participants could pursue on forest land if they chose to do so, independent of and unrelated to the derby," he said.

Eight environmental groups filed a complaint accusing the federal agency of violating the National Environmental Policy Act by allowing Idaho for Wildlife, a hunting group, to organize derbies in 2013 and 2015 without a special use permit for the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

The Forest Service's decision was "arbitrary and capricious" because such permits are required for similar events such as fishing contests and vehicle races, according to plaintiffs Wildearth Guardians, Cascadia Wildlands, Boulder-White Clouds Council, Kootenai Environmental Alliance, Predator Defense, Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project and Project Coyote.

The agency gave "blanket permission" for the events without any analysis or public comment even though the U.S. Bureau of Land Management determined permits were required and then didn't allow the competition on its property, the plaintiffs said.

"The killing contest is an organized event involving time limits, cash prizes and hundreds of participants, and has a greater impact on forest resources than recreational hunting," according to plaintiffs.

The Forest Service argued that derbies don't need special use permits because the hunters aren't congregating in one location, but the agency previously decided that the distance between participants of other events was irrelevant, the

environmental groups said.

Also, the hunting derbies effectively congregated people because registration and ceremonies were held in Salmon, Idaho, and hunters weren't likely to venture far during a relatively short time frame, plaintiffs said. "In contrast to an ordinary hunting season, the contest causes an intense burst of killing over a weekend," the plaintiffs said.

Before the Forest Service could issue a permit, officials should also have studied the environmental effects of the hunting contest as a "major federal action," the environmentalists said.

"The contest increases the risk of wolf- and coyote-killing not just during the three- or four-day event but throughout the year by fostering intolerance to wolves and carnivores generally," according to plaintiffs.

The judge rejected the arguments, finding that the derby didn't charge a fee or limit hunting to the national forest's borders, as participants could shoot predators on private lands as well.

The awarding of prizes and other events occurred outside the national forest, and it's likely that more hunters entered the forest during peak hunting periods than during the derby, Bush said.

For similar reasons, the Forest Service didn't have to analyze the derby under NEPA, since hunting is allowed within the national forest regardless of the contest, he said.

Bush said he didn't doubt the environmental groups felt their enjoyment of the national forest was diminished by the hunting derby.

"But such use is permitted under the Idaho's regulation of hunting, including for predators, and is a use that has existed on the forest since the days that Theodore Roosevelt first set aside the forest reserve in 1906 that later became the (national) forest," he said.

Idaho to exceed 250,000 acre-feet in recharge

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

MENAN, Idaho — Though the region's irrigation season hasn't started, heavy flows have been diverted from the Snake River into the Great Feeder Canal since early March.

In the Upper Snake River Plain, the Feeder, Fremont-Madison Irrigation District, Enterprise Irrigation District, Farmers Friend Irrigation District and the City of Blackfoot have opened their systems to help the state intentionally inject natural flows into the groundwater to replenish the declining aquifer, through a process known as managed recharge.

The state's upper valley recharge water right is only in priority during especially wet springs. In the lower valley, the state holds a recharge right that's active for at least 150 days, including all of winter.

The Idaho Department of Water Resources has recharged 220,000 acre-feet of water combined in the upper and lower Snake valleys since last October, breaking the previous recharge record of 160,000 acre-feet set in 2012. IDWR recharge coordinator Wes Hipke said the state is on pace to exceed a goal it set in 2015 to average at least 250,000 acre-feet of recharge per year, with the upper valley poised to contribute just shy of half of the volume.

"It's going to be a really good recharge year all the way around," Hipke said. "There is going to be a lot of natural recharge that goes on, which is



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Wes Hipke, recharge coordinator with the Idaho Department of Water Resources, stands by the diversion into the Great Feeder Canal system near Menan, Idaho, which is taking in water for managed aquifer recharge. Hipke led an April 10 tour of recharge sites in the Upper Snake River Plain.

going to benefit the aquifer, and then you add on top of that the stuff we're doing, and there's going to be even more benefit."

Hipke said the department will also likely exceed the \$1.5 million it budgeted for this season to pay canal companies fees for facilitating recharge.

Four of the 21 canals that divert from the Feeder also have their headgates open to conduct recharge.

Luke Hicks represents the Feeder system on the Committee of Nine, which provides guidance on behalf of the major federal irrigation projects in the Upper Snake. Hicks said the Feeder system has recharged 34,000 acre-feet already this season. He

explained his canal deferred some of its maintenance until next year to allow recharge.

"We see water availability as the importance of this season," said Hicks, who chairs the Committee of Nine's recharge committee.

Hicks said his company has begun studying four potential sites for conducting off-canal recharge — ranging from 10 to 50 cubic feet per second — thereby allowing recharge to continue even after irrigation starts.

Hipke said the irrigation season is expected to start on about April 20, but he anticipates strong natural flows will support recharging in the upper valley's off-canal sites through June.

Jeff Raybould, an Idaho Water Resource Board member from St. Anthony, explained the Bureau of Land Management is conducting an environmental review to expand a critical Upper Valley off-canal recharge site on the Egin Bench, accessed by the Fremont-Madison system. Raybould said the project, once approved, will expand an existing recharge pond into surrounding BLM land, helping to increase recharge capacity on the bench from 800 acre-feet per day to 1,000 acre-feet per day.

Hipke said the Egin project is among five infrastructure upgrades the state hopes to implement this fall throughout the Snake to expand recharge capacity.

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