

Okanogan ranchers still leery of U.S. Forest Service

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

OKANOGAN, Wash. — Ranchers shocked and upset by the U.S. Forest Service grazing reprimands they received in January have now gotten agency grazing instructions for this season and will keep a wary eye on how the agency monitors them.

The agency has been scolded and received enough pressure from members of Congress for its “blatant mistakes” and “environmental bias” in monitoring that it’s “kind of in a sit-back mode,” said Jim DeTro, Okanogan County commissioner. “They know they’ve messed up. We are assured this year’s monitoring will be done by range techs in coordination with permittees,” DeTro said.

Nicole Kuchenbuch, a rancher and president of Okanogan County Farm Bureau, said the staffs of U.S. Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and U.S. Reps. Dan Newhouse and Cathy McMorris Rodgers told Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest Supervisor Mike Williams that the agency failed to follow its own policies and should rescind letters of non-compliance it issued to 25 ranchers early this year.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press File
Bunk Ayers, who ranches north of Riverside, Wash., fixes a fence last year while cattle remained on winter ground before being turned out on grazing allotments.

“The crux of the issue is the Forest Service breached our contracts by not including us in the monitoring and planning,” Kuchenbuch said.

“Williams responded that the letters are no big deal and that he is sure we will find resolution during the

2017 grazing season. The permittees do not accept that at all. The letters are a very big deal. They’re a black eye. They’re step one in a four-step process for suspension or termination of our grazing contracts,” she said.

The letters alleged over

grazing, grazing in unauthorized areas and streambank damage on grazing allotments in the Tonasket Ranger District.

Williams could not be reached for comment.

USFS Tonasket Ranger Matt Reidy said the agen-

cy does not rescind letters but has issued new letters of compliance in two cases based on new information. Letters of compliance will be issued for the rest after this season if monitoring shows no problems, he said.

With one exception, all Annual Operation Instruction meetings with ranchers have been held and concerns have been addressed. Ranchers will be notified and allowed to help pick monitoring sites and be present when monitoring is done in September and October, he said.

Newhouse wrote a letter to USFS Region 6 Forester Jim Pena on March 10 saying the non-compliance letters violated USFS policy and that Williams and Reidy seemed reluctant to resolve the issue.

In a March 24 response, Pena wrote that he fully supports allotments, that issues of concern arose from monitoring and that non-compliance letters did not mean any decisions had been made on permit authorizations.

“The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest does not intend to shorten, limit or in any other way reduce permitted grazing during the 2017 field season,” Pena wrote. The USFS will work “closely and

collaboratively to resolve issues,” he wrote.

Reidy has told Capital Press that policies were not violated because permittees were told monitoring would occur and notification requirements differ depending on circumstances.

Kuchenbuch said new letters of compliance were issued if monitoring was done where it was not supposed to be, where cattle congregate near water and salt licks.

A Washington State University Extension range and livestock specialist “strongly disagrees” with monitoring close to water and salt licks and will hold a clinic for ranchers and USFS personnel in July on proper grass monitoring, Kuchenbuch said.

She said ranchers have for years had good relations with USFS personnel who understood the region but that Pena, Williams and Reidy are all relatively new in their positions.

Last summer’s monitors were ill-trained and the Forest Service needs to acknowledge the mistakes, she said.

“Whether they came with a malicious agenda or making errors of rookies doesn’t matter. They need to fix this and start over,” Kuchenbuch said. “This isn’t how we do things out West.”

Soilborne wheat mosaic virus on the rise in Walla Walla Valley

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Wheat farmers in the Walla Walla Valley are experiencing more soilborne wheat mosaic virus this year, a researcher says.

Researchers have identified 16 fields that tested positive for the disease since March 5, said Christina Hagerty, assistant professor of cereal pathology at Oregon State University.

“It really seems as though we have an increase of the virus this season,” Hagerty said. “Growers who have not dealt with this disease in the past, it has shown up in their fields this year. Growers who have dealt with this disease in small patches of their fields are now seeing it in much larger areas.”

Hagerty blames wet conditions and the likely transportation of infected soil for the increase in the disease, which causes severe stunting in wheat.

“We think about equipment sanitation and boot sanitation, and while those things are crucial, this can be picked up in a dust storm by wind,” she said. “I think about the elk tracks in my plots in Walla Walla County.”

The disease was first identified in 2005 in the Hermiston, Ore., area, and in the Walla Walla, Wash., area in 2008.

Hagerty credits OSU professor emeritus Dick Smiley and Washington State University professor and extension plant pathologist Tim Murray for leading research efforts. In a moderate infestation, Murray estimated the virus would reduce yields by four bushels an acre. In a severe infestation, it can cause a 20-bushel reduction in yield.

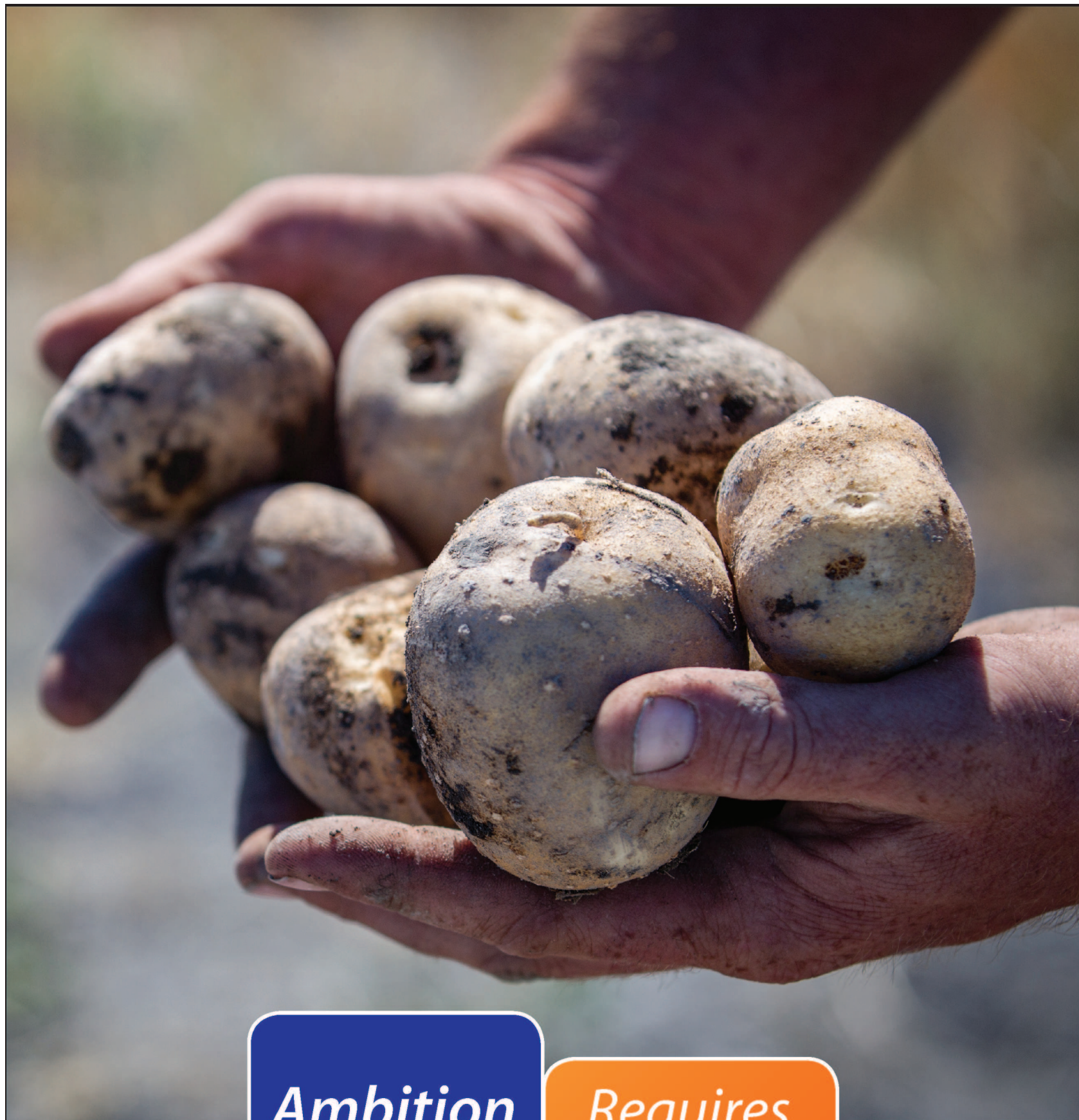
“Some locations are quite severe, some are moderate,” Hagerty said.

Planting a resistant wheat variety is the best option for growers, Hagerty said.

Breeding programs are screening for resistance to the virus, she said.

Hagerty recommends understanding conditions favorable for the disease. OSU is studying possible effects of an extra nitrogen application to boost the plant.

Farmers who suspect they have the virus need to send their wheat to a plant clinic for molecular analysis, Hagerty said.



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