

# Sheep research station on USDA chopping block, again

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press



USDA File

Sheep graze at the U.S. Sheep Experimental Station near Dubois, Idaho. USDA is proposing to close the facility under President Donald Trump's budget proposal.

The U.S. Sheep Experiment Station at Dubois, Idaho, is one of 17 Agricultural Research Service laboratories slated for closure under President Donald Trump's Department of Agriculture FY 2018 budget proposal.

The facility is operated by USDA in partnership with the University of Idaho, and is the only one in the U.S. doing research on range sheep. It was on USDA's chopping block twice before, in 2014 and 2015. It was spared both times in ag appropriations bills through efforts by Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho.

The beleaguered facility had been the target of lawsuits by environmental groups claiming its grazing activities are a source of wildlife conflict and possible disease transmission between domestic and wild sheep.

It's also faced long vacancies in research positions, with USDA saying in 2014 it didn't have the funding to fill the positions while it was responding to those legal actions.

In 2015 then-USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack told Congress the proposed closure was

due to a lack of financial and human resources at the location and costs associated with animal feed, infrastructure and staff.

Stakeholders, including industry and state and local governments, have tried for years to address the issues with

USDA to secure the viability of the station and its continued research.

Jim Brown, the public relations director for the Montana Wool Growers Association, said the organization has worked hard to keep the sheep station a viable federal research facility.

Keeping it from closure is something the industry faces again with the new administration. But Congress has always rejected its closure, stating support for the research being done there, he said.

Congress has the sole authority to set the federal budget.

Brown said it's a one-of-a-kind facility in the U.S., doing research on sheep breeding, range management, reproduction and wild-domestic sheep interaction.

"It would be irreplaceable. It would be devastating to lose that continuity," he said.

On May 25, MWGA sent

letters to Sens. Jon Tester, D-Mont., and Steve Daines, R-Mont., opposing Trump's budget proposal to close the station, stating the critical need for it to be fully funded to fill longstanding vacant positions.

The station covers about 48,000 acres on the Idaho-Montana border and has about 3,000 mature sheep plus young sheep of various ages.

Its current budget is \$2.1 million, with a staff of 16 full-time federal and two University of Idaho employees, according to ARS.

Peter Orwick, executive director of the American Sheep Association, said there has to be room in the budget for the only ARS research facility in the country dedicated to the sheep industry.

News of the proposed closure caught the Idaho Wool Growers Association by surprise, said Barry Duelke, association president and a Buhl sheep producer.

"We had an extensive go-around battle essentially two or three years ago and we thought that was over with," he said.

Sheep producers have always supported the sheep station and will continue to do so, he said.

"We will continue to fight for the survival of the Dubois station, I can assure you of that," he said.

USDA Deputy Secretary Michael Young told reporters May 23 that USDA's budget for research, education and economics includes \$2.5 billion in discretionary funding, a decrease of \$425 million from 2017.

"Within that funding there's about \$1 billion for the Agricultural Research Service, the USDA laboratories. I would note there, there's a cut of about \$142 million that would result in the closure of 17 of those laboratories out of the total of 90," he said.

# Freeze damage shows up in Washington, Oregon blackberries

By DON JENKINS  
and ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Southwest Washington blackberry grower Jerry Dobbins stands alongside a blackberry field May 24 in Woodland. Dobbins and other growers say a cold winter and wet spring damaged blackberry vines and will sharply reduce yields.

Oregon and Washington berry farmers and crop consultants say that the harm inflicted by a hard winter on blackberry bushes is becoming clear.

Bushes are failing to bloom, and some farmers have cut canes to the ground, sacrificing this year's crop in hopes of rebounding stronger in 2018.

"Probably the hardest decision a farmer has to make is scrap his crop. But if you don't see blooms, you won't see fruit," said Ridgefield, Wash., berry farmer Jerry Dobbins. "The damage is catastrophic. It's every place."

Oregon dominates U.S. blackberry production, while berry growers across the Columbia River in southwest Washington have been adding blackberry acres. Growers produced large crops in 2015 and 2016, but saw prices fall.

The U.S. is a net importer of blackberries, with berries coming from such countries as Mexico, Chile and Serbia, according to the USDA.

Although this year's domestic crop apparently will be smaller, Woodland, Wash., berry grower George Thoeny said he fears that imported berries will hold down prices that farmers receive.

"We hope the price will rise some, but we won't know until the season is over," Thoeny said. "I think the industry is looking at a disaster."

The Willamette Valley and southwest Washington weathered a cold winter, followed by a wet spring. This March was the second-wettest on record in southwest Washington, according to the National

Centers for Environmental Information, which has records dating back to 1885.

John Davis of Crop Production Services said he has never seen a blackberry crop like this in his 38 years as an agricultural consultant in both states. "If you look, there's damage in every field," he said.

Although the extent of the

damage only recently became evident, he said he believes the cold snaps caused the harm, more than the rain.

"Week by week, I noticed there was more and more damage showing up," Davis said. "The blackberry crop went from what I thought would be a good crop to marginal."

Crop consultant Tom Peerbolt said that in parts of Washington County, a prime berry growing area west of Portland, the temperature dropped to 5 degrees. With blackberries coming into full bloom before the July harvest, growers are assessing the damage, he said.

"The blackberry crop is not going to be a full crop this year," he said. "If we don't get any additional weather extremes, we can maximize what we've got out there."

Peerbolt said that raspberries, blueberries and strawberries are fine, an observation confirmed by others.

Chad Finn, a berry breeder

with the USDA's Agricultural Research Service at Oregon State University, said freeze damage was spotty.

Berry test plots in Corvallis and at OSU's North Willamette Research and Extension Center in Aurora survived the cold. Fields in the Forest Grove area west of Portland and nearer the Columbia River Gorge, where cold air pools, sustained damage, Finn said.

Peerbolt said freeze damage was heaviest at farms growing the Marion blackberry variety.

On a tour of farms in Clark and Cowlitz counties Tuesday, Dobbins pointed to fields of Black Diamond and Columbia Star blackberries that were damaged, too.

He estimated that yields in slightly damaged fields will be down 10 percent.

Dobbins cut 5 acres to the ground. As he watches his remaining 55 acres struggle to bloom, he said he wishes he had cut more acres.

# Wheat growers deal with additional stripe rust pressure

By ERIC MORTENSON  
Capital Press



Courtesy of Chris Mundt/OSU

Stripe rust is a growing concern for Oregon wheat farmers.

Oregon wheat farmers, like their counterparts in Washington and Idaho, are using additional fungicide treatments to stave off stripe rust this year.

Christina Hagerty, a plant pathologist with Oregon State University's Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center near Pendleton, said a heavier than normal snowfall and extended periods of cold and rain from fall to spring resulted in conditions ideal for diseases.

She said the season is shaping up to have higher than average stripe rust infections, and the weather conditions also were conducive to development of snow mold and wheat mosaic virus, which Oregon growers usually don't see.

The situation is part of a conundrum faced by North Central and Eastern Oregon's dryland wheat producers in particular. In Pendleton, 9.14 inches of rain has fallen since January — 3 inches more than normal, according to the National Weather Service.

Additional precipitation in a region that gets by on 8 to 20 inches of rain per year is always welcome, but can come with a cost.

"The conditions that lead to good, strong, healthy plants often overlap with conditions that lead to good, strong, healthy pathogens," Hagerty said. A lack of moisture limits plant growth, but it also keeps pathogens in check, she said.

"I have heard folks with far more experience than me say that big rust years often have the highest yields," she said.

Christopher Mundt, a plant pathology professor who supervised Hagerty's Ph.D. work at OSU, said he sometimes jokes that stripe rust emergence is a good

sign. "That means they've got enough water to have a good crop," he said.

He said growers were able to see stripe rust developing last fall.

"Rust got established really early," he said. "It's a pathogen that has a very high reproductive rate, it goes through multiple generations of reproduction. Anytime it starts early, there's more chance for buildup."

Disease-resistant varieties developed by wheat breeders kept stripe rust at bay for years, but new strains have spread, Mundt said.

Snow mold is more of a problem in colder areas such as Eastern Washington, he said. It can form when snow falls on wet ground and keeps it at 32 degrees for extended periods. In Oregon it's rare, and plants often can shake it off and grow out of initial damage.

Dry, hot weather can shut down stripe rust, especially in wheat varieties bred to have high temperature, adult plant resistance. Otherwise, fungicide applications are effective, but costly, the researchers said.

"Growers are out there looking for it," Mundt said. "They've picked up the lesson that you can't let rust get away from them."

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