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Idaho

Rental rates for Idaho farmland down

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — The average rents paid for Idaho farmland are down this year.

USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates that cash rent for all cropland in Idaho will average \$160 an acre in 2017, which is down \$8, or 5 percent, from 2016.

That didn't come as a surprise to state Sen. Jim Patrick, a Twin Falls farmer.

"It should be down because commodity prices are all down," he said.

The average cash rent for all Idaho cropland increased 6 percent to \$168 last year, which at the time surprised Patrick, other farmers, ag economists and ag land appraisers.

This year's average rent "is a little closer to what you



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

A wheat field is harvested Aug. 3 in Nampa, Idaho. Cash rent for all cropland in Idaho is estimated to be \$160 in 2017, down \$8 an acre from 2016. Irrigated cropland is estimated at \$215 an acre, down \$10 from last year.

would expect it to be," Patrick said.

According to NASS, cash rent for irrigated cropland in Idaho is estimated at \$215 an acre this year, down \$10 from last year, and rent for non-irrigated cropland is \$58 an acre, \$3 an acre less than 2016.

Before falling this year,

cash rents for cropland in Idaho had risen steadily, from \$139 an acre in 2013 to \$151 in 2014, \$158 in 2015 and \$168 in 2016.

Doug Robison, Northwest Farm Credit Service senior vice president of agriculture for Western Idaho, told Capital Press that his company

has "seen some very limited decreases in multi-year land rents for row crop ground this past year, typically in the \$25 to \$50 per acre range, as contracts have come up for renewal."

"Despite the difficult environment for commodities, demand for farm acreage remains strong with multiple bids avail-

able for high-quality ground," Robison said in an email.

Bob Morrison, an independent ag land appraiser in Idaho Falls, said the rents for irrigated farmland he has looked at this year are down by about \$25 an acre.

He believes rents for cropland in his region will stabilize heading into 2018 because there is little land for lease or sale.

"Many farmers are needing that land because of economies of scale," he said. "They don't want to lose those acres; they don't want to lose those leases."

Robison said the outlook for cropland rents is mixed.

"With the recent uptick in commodity prices, there may be some increased appetite for new acreage with a few producers this fall, while other farmers may choose to remain on the sidelines as profitability concerns persist," he said.

Hay export facility opens at Pocatello airport

Dairies in China create growing demand for forage

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — A new facility at the Pocatello Regional Airport's business park has opened opportunities for southeast Idaho hay farmers to export their crops overseas.

Driscoll TopHay LLC — a partnership of American Falls-based Driscoll Brothers Farms and TopHay, a British Columbia-based company owned by three Chinese businessmen — plans to export 100,000 tons of locally grown hay this year, eventually ramping up to exporting 150,000 tons.

The new operation moved into a vacant warehouse owned



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Jason Hawkins, general manager of Driscoll TopHay LLC, stands by a press used to reshape and compact hay bales for export. The facility is at the Pocatello Regional Airport business park.

by the City of Pocatello that was ideally configured for hay storage, said Jason Hawkins, the operation's general manager.

Hawkins said the partners invested \$2 million in a hay

press, which will allow the space in containers to be maximized.

The press should enable Hawkins and his staff to fill each container with 25 to 27 tons of hay, rather than 15 to 17

tons without compaction.

The alfalfa will be shipped to China, Japan and South Korea. He said exporting to the Middle East is also a possibility.

Driscoll's trucking business will haul full containers to Salt Lake City, where they'll be loaded onto trains bound for ports in Long Beach and Oakland, Calif. Hawkins said his staff started testing the press on Friday. The facility has 15 workers, and the trucking business added a dozen new employees to haul hay.

University of Idaho Extension forage specialist Glenn Shewmaker said southeast Idaho growers have historically had a freight disadvantage in exporting hay.

Shewmaker said Larsen Farms has a hay press in Northeast Idaho, and Standlee Hay runs one in the Magic Valley, but the new operation in Pocatello should "fill in a gap for the counties a little closer."

Blackfoot hay grower Jerry

Elliott exports through Standlee Hay but believes he'll still benefit from the increased competition for forage.

"You take 100,000 tons of hay out of the area and it's bound to help," Elliott said.

Hawkins said the partners have relationships with about 300 dairies, mostly in China, where he anticipates growing demand for forage should continue well into the future.

"We're excited to bring that money from China into Idaho's economy," Hawkins said.

He said the Driscolls now farm 26,000 acres, including 4,000 acres of alfalfa to support a cattle ranch.

They were looking for a better alternative to raising wheat and plan to significantly increase their alfalfa production to support their export business. But they've also been in contact with about 100 area alfalfa growers and will have to buy a lot of supplemental hay, Hawkins said.

BLM expects large rangeland seed buy

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

AMERICAN FALLS, Idaho — Ken Koopin has found raising grass seed for dryland range is risky and challenging, and the market for the niche crop is exceedingly volatile.

But officials with the Bureau of Land Management — a major buyer that uses large quantities of locally adapted seed varieties for its reclamation efforts — say their seed inventories are running low amid a bad wildfire season.

That's good news for Koopin and a small group of regional farmers who go through the hassle of raising rangeland grass seed. BLM officials were to solicit bids from seed suppliers on Aug. 14 to replenish inventories at their two major seed warehouses, located in Boise and Ely, Nev.

Vendors will have 10 days to respond.

"It's supply driven probably more than any ag market we deal with," Koopin said. "If you've got 20 acres more than you need, the price can drop in half."

BLM National Seed Coordinator Patricia Roller said she's already fielded 160 seed requests and delivered 1.5 million pounds of seed, though her busy season spans from August through December.

She expects to exceed the 2 million to 3 million pounds she delivers in a normal year. Roller said BLM stocks 213 seed varieties and has a 2.6 million-pound storage capacity.

"We're sitting at 600,000 pounds now," Roller said. "Basically, we're empty."

In late July, Koopin finished harvesting about 10 native and dryland grass seed species, raised under irriga-

tion on about 180 acres in the Rockland Valley. He first experimented in grass seed about 25 years ago and decided to resume grass-seed production four years ago. He plants perennial grasses, harvesting a single planting of some of the bromes for just two seasons and other varieties for up to four seasons before weed pressure — especially from cheat grass — forces him to replant.

Grasses require little water and fertilizer, but they're labor-intensive to grow, involving cultivation between rows and frequent hand weeding. Koopin can't insure his grasses and there's a narrow harvest window to avoid poor germination or seed shattering. Koopin produces certified seed, requiring field inspections and testing for purity and germination by Idaho Crop Improvement Association.

USDA's Aberdeen Plant Materials Center provides seed to companies for commercial production on behalf of the University of Idaho and Utah Crop Improvement Association foundation seed programs.

Idaho Grimm Growers Warehouse Corp., based in Blackfoot, buys Koopin's seed. They planned to bid on BLM's seed buy, and they also supply livestock producers and participants in habitat programs, such as the Conservation Reserve Program.

Seed prices range from \$4 to \$15 per pound, said Chelsy Harten, president of the corporation.

"It is a specialized market — definitely not for the weak of heart," Harten said. "I do see a trend that more (farmers) want to grow (rangeland grass seed) with grain prices down, but it really is a specialized crop to grow."

Planting dates delayed for fall

Grain growers in three counties seek to limit exposure to some diseases

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — USDA's Risk Management Agency has moved back the final planting dates for farmers raising fall grain in three Eastern Idaho counties, protecting insurance eligibility for growers who delay planting to avoid exposure to some diseases.

Final planting dates for RMA's winter coverage endorsement for the 2018 crop year have been moved back to Oct. 31 in Bannock, Bingham and Bonneville counties.

The final planting dates had been Oct. 15 in Bannock and Bingham counties and Sept. 30 in Bonneville County.

Ben Thiel, director of RMA's Spokane Regional Office, said his office reviewed the request and determined that the growing season is continuing later into the fall, and the change is actuarially sound to help avoid losses to certain crop diseases.

"The Risk Management Agency continuously works with and listens to stakeholders to ensure its policies are meeting the needs of producers," Thiel said in a press release.

University of Idaho Extension cereals pathologist Juliet Marshall explained delaying planting by a week or two helps growers avoid exposing fall grain to aphids that pass through in the early fall and transmit barley yellow dwarf virus.

The disease can reduce grain yields by 15 to 30 percent, and greater than 50 percent in extreme cases, Marshall said.

Marshall said Idaho grain farmers who delayed planting last fall had few problems with barley yellow dwarf this season.

However, she said a few growers south of Burley planted in their normal window and had upward of 95 percent of their grain infected with barley yellow dwarf.

Marshall said delaying fall planting can also help growers reduce foot rot, stripe rust and wheat streak mosaic virus.

Stacey Satterlee, executive director with Idaho Grain Producers Association, said the insurance endorsement covers growers for winter kill and crop problems associated with heavy snow and winter weather.

Satterlee said she's heard several inquiries from growers about the revised planting dates. Satterlee said growers in Bonneville County have been especially concerned about the Risk Management Agency's early final planting dates, and many of them avoided planting winter wheat last fall rather than follow the RMA dates.

"I'm wondering if we won't see a little more winter wheat," Satterlee said.

Brett Wilken, with Thresher Artisan Wheat, who recommended the change to industry leaders, said the timing of the fall's first freeze is occurring later than before, with the first freeze of last fall occurring in November.

Wilken believes the change in planting dates is especially timely given the roughly 70-cent-per-bushel premium hard red winter wheat brings over soft white wheat.

Wilken explained growers often like to follow potatoes with fall wheat to take advantage of the residual nitrogen to boost protein levels, and the revised planting dates should "give growers more opportunities to plant behind potatoes."



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