

# Washington

## Pollinator seed mix may contain amaranth weed

WSU warns farmers about prolific and 'troublesome' Palmer amaranth

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

Washington State University officials are recommending Northwest farmers be cautious after reports that some pollinator seed mixes elsewhere were found to be contaminated with the weed Palmer amaranth.

"As far as we know, we don't have Palmer amaranth, and that's the fear, that these packets of seed will bring it here," said Drew Lyon, weed science professor at WSU.

A Weed Science Society of America survey has la-

beled Palmer amaranth "the most troublesome weed in the U.S." According to the society, some native seed mixes designed to foster habitat for honeybees and other pollinators in the Midwest were found to contain the weed. Seed mixes should be tested to make sure they are free of the weed.

"There's a big push for pollinator health, and so a lot of people want to plant these things," Lyon said. "It doesn't sound like maybe quality control on the end of these companies is great. And that seed is really tiny. It'd be an easy mistake to make, but it could be a costly mistake to make."

The weed is common in fields across the South and the Southeast, and has been traveling north for several decades.

Its small seeds are easily spread by birds and farm equipment, and in birdseed, livestock feed and manure.

Lyon said it's possible someone could unknowingly order contaminated seed mix online.

The warm-season, broad-leaf weed could pose the most risk for irrigated production in the Columbia Basin. The crops growing in July and August would be most affected, Lyon said.

"It's a very prolific seed producer," he said. "It's glyphosate resistant, and ... we use a lot of glyphosate in our ag systems. If we have a weed like Palmer amaranth that's so prolific and can spread so quickly, and we can't use Roundup to help us control it, it's going to become a bit problematic."

Lyon also advises grow-

**Online**

<http://bit.ly/2y25xw5>

ers to keep an eye out and be aware of what Palmer amaranth looks like.

"If you see it, pull it before it can set any seed," he said.

Growers should also alert the university. Researchers would try to confirm the weed and the source of the seed mix and spread the word, Lyon said.

WSU researchers will wait and see if any Palmer amaranth is reported.

"I don't know if it's inevitable that it will get here some day, but it seems like things move pretty good," Lyon said. "As far as I know, we don't have it in the state right now. And that's the best situation to be in."



Howard F. Schwartz/Colorado State University  
Palmer amaranth with a seed head growing in a Colorado crop field.

## State funding for new commodity buffers stuck in budget holdup

Program seeks to protect water quality in streams

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

SPOKANE — The Spokane Conservation District is continuing with signups for its Regional Conservation Partnership Program despite uncertainty over funding for key offerings.

The uncertainty is caused by legislative wrangling over the state capital budget. The state Senate declined to pass a capital budget until Gov. Jay Inslee addresses a state Supreme Court decision that threatens to halt most new rural private wells.

The budget holdup includes \$9 million in matching state funds for the RCPP from the Washington Conservation Commission. Other district RCPP projects are also impacted.

Last year, the Spokane district touted the inclusion of "commodity buffers," paying farmers what they would earn raising a crop to instead establish a buffer along streams.

The budget issues are holding up funding for new buffers, said Walt Edelen, water resources program manager.

"There's enough money to fulfill current obligations, but the district can't guarantee farmers a payment for new contracts or direct-seed incentives until the Legislature finishes its capital budget."

"We don't like the fact it hampers our program," Edelen said.

Deer Park, Wash., farmer Chris Eckhart partnered with RCPP to add buffers near a fish-bearing creek and make the jump to minimum-tillage and no-till farming. He raises



Spokane Conservation District

Deer Park, Wash., farmer Chris Eckhart harvests spring barley near a filter strip financed through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program commodity buffer program. Eckhart partnered with RCPP to put in "commodity buffers" on his farm and receive roughly the same amount of money as he would by farming it.

wheat, canola, oats and barley on 1,400 acres.

Eckhart said the district shared the cost of those changes. He hopes legislators consider the importance of investing in water quality as they work on the capital budget.

"At the same time, you have to consider the producers and some of the lost revenue," he said. "That's some of the most productive ground that people are asking them to take out of production."

Eckhart plans to apply for more commodity buffers despite the funding uncertainty. He said he is "hopefully optimistic."

"If they prioritize things correctly, I think things will get worked out," he said.

Edelen encourages farmers to contact legislators about the importance of the funding.

"We're hoping this does come through, because there are producers out there that are depending on those funds to help them move forward in conservation efforts and to buy equipment," he said.

Edelen said the district would like to find long-term funding for the buffers.

"It's a new program, and people were excited about

it," Edelen said. "We had a very good, successful signup and we have contracts in place, which we are funding this next year. We just can't take any new signups for it until we get things resolved with this funding."

Future funding is also in question for the direct-seed incentive, used to bolster direct seed farming practices.

Funding is still available for the other programs under RCPP through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Farmers who sign up will go on the list for commodity buffers and direct-seed incentives, Edelen said. When the money is available, the district will be able to begin work on those contracts.

The district is accepting applications for RCPP through Oct. 16. The district matched \$7.7 million from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service for the program.

"Our programs aim to help producers achieve a sustainable operation, both economically and environmentally," said program manager Charlie Peterson.

Interested farmers should contact Peterson at 509-535-7274, ext. 220 or charlie-peterson@sccd.org.



A canal brings federal surface water to Grant County in Central Washington. A Grant County farmer has been ordered to stop irrigating more than 500 acres with groundwater. Ecology says the groundwater right's place of use couldn't be changed because federal surface water is available.

## Washington farmer's appeal of Ecology order arrives too late

Grower told to stop irrigating farmland

By **DON JENKINS**  
Capital Press

A Central Washington potato farmer missed by four days a deadline to appeal an order to stop irrigating more than 500 acres, losing a chance to present his case to a state board and possibly leaving him liable for illegally using an estimated 1,830 acre-feet of water.

Moses Lake resident Ron Fode said Wednesday that he thought he would have some leeway in appealing the Department of Ecology's order since he was representing himself. The Pollution Control Hearings Board, however, ruled this month that a 30-day window to appeal must be strictly enforced.

"I'm trying to be David, but David didn't win this time," Fode said. "I just shot myself in the foot, I guess."

Ecology claims Fode is irrigating land not authorized by his right to draw from the Odessa Subarea aquifer. Fode received an order to

stop watering June 28. The hearings board, which hears challenges to Ecology's decisions, received Fode's appeal in the mail Aug. 1, after the July 28 deadline. Ecology moved to summarily dismiss the case because of the missed deadline, and the three-member hearings board agreed.

In the meantime, Fode has continued to irrigate. He estimated he stood to lose about \$871,000 if he stopped watering potatoes, hay and alfalfa.

Fode said he was confident in his case, based on his state groundwater right, federal water contracts and past practices.

Ecology denied Fode's request for a seasonal change of his water rights in February. Ecology says that Fode's groundwater right applies to land that's also now served by surface water from the Columbia Basin Project. The state says it has invested \$75 million to acquire the federal water to replace groundwater drawn from the declining aquifer.

The case involves multiple landowners, multiple legal contracts and differing takes

on the events leading up to Ecology ordering Fode to stop irrigating. Fode submitted 61 pages of legal documents. The hearings board's decision to dismiss his appeal addressed only the missed deadline.

Fode said he still hopes to work out his differences with Ecology. "I want to diplomatically go in and say, 'Let's negotiate this thing,'" he said.

Ecology's Columbia Basin watermaster, Kevin Brown, stated in a court declaration that if Fode keeps irrigating through the end of the season, he will have illegally used roughly 1,830-acre feet of water.

Ecology has not fined Fode for using the water, but the agency will evaluate the case at the end of the season to see whether penalties are appropriate, an Ecology spokeswoman said.

Fode said that he wasn't sure what he will do next and that he was worried about being fined.

"I'm very concerned. My livelihood would be completely ruined," he said. "If I made a mistake, I'll own it, but I don't feel like having a monetary penalty."

## Ethics complaint filed over wolf research

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

The legislative ethics board will take up a complaint filed against state Rep. Joel Kretz over allegations that he pressured Washington State University administrators to fire a controversial wolf researcher.

The Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility filed the complaint. Robert Wielgus, who runs the WSU Large Carnivore Conservation Laboratory, contacted PEER, said Adam Carlesco, the activist group's staff counsel.

Wielgus has repeatedly been the center of controversy regarding wolves. He was reprimanded last year by WSU after accusing a rancher of purposely putting cows near a wolfpack's den in the Colville National Forest. WSU administrators said they investigated and found that Wielgus' claims were "inaccurate and inappropriate."



Don Jenkins/Capital Press File

A public employee activist group has accused Okanogan County Rep. Joel Kretz of violating a state ethics law.

The PEER ethics complaint alleges that Kretz, R-Wauconda, and administrators discussed efforts to curtail Wielgus' summer research and that Kretz threatened to withhold university funding for a plant sciences building unless WSU fired Wielgus.

PEER claims that under state law "a legislator is not permitted to use his/her position or public resources to assist constituents only because he/she has a personal interest in the subject mat-

ter or in the constituent's cause."

The return of wolves has been highly controversial in Washington state, including Okanogan County, which Kretz, who is also a rancher, represents.

Kretz denies the allegations of ethical improprieties.

"Anybody can file a complaint, and I don't believe there's any basis in fact," Kretz told the Capital Press. He said he will submit a response to the ethics board refuting the claims.

The ethics board will look over the complaint and determine whether to proceed, Kretz said.

The board's next meeting is Oct. 18.

"We'd like to see a level of sanction or some sort of disciplinary action so that this sort of behavior does not continue with such a high-ranking member of the Legislature," said PEER's Carlesco. Kretz is the deputy leader of the House Republican Caucus.

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