

WSDA acts on goal to radio tag all cows

Department proposes first step

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

The Washington State Department of Agriculture made the first formal move Wednesday to electronically follow every cow in the state from birth to slaughter.

The department indicated it will propose replacing metal ID tags with radio-frequency identification, or RFID, on tens of thousands of cows. According to WSDA, electronic tags will be less prone to record-keeping errors and help track cattle as individuals, not just part of a branded herd.

“Updating our rules to incorporate RFID devices is an important first step in strengthening our state’s animal disease traceability system,” State Veterinarian Brian Joseph said in a written statement.

WSDA plans to mark all cows with a radio-frequency identification by no later than 2023. WSDA says its ambitions are in line with USDA’s national goals.

WSDA envisions recording all movements of a cow from one premise to another, including small private sales between neighbors or trips to fairs. Reaction from producer



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

The Washington State Department of Agriculture has taken the first step to replace manually read tags with radio frequency identification on all cattle.

groups has been mixed. Some ranchers see mandatory electronic tags as unnecessary and intrusive, and potentially costly.

WSDA says marking all cows with radio tags will be a multi-phase project. As a start, the department initiated rule-writing to automatically put radio tags on cattle under three circumstances:

- Female cattle vaccinated for brucellosis.
- Bulls tested for trichomoniasis.
- Sexually intact cattle and bison older than 18 months offered at public livestock markets.

In all cases, the cattle are now fitted with metal ID tags. “It’s a small step, but they

have to make the step to get on first base,” said Stevens County rancher Ted Wishon, past president of the Cattle Producers of Washington. He questioned whether the radio tags would be as durable and reliable as imprinted metal tags.

“I do oppose the move because it’s just sticking your foot in the door, and I don’t see the benefit,” Wishon said.

The Washington Cattlemen’s Association supports moving to radio tags for disease-surveillance programs. The organization has not taken a stance on requiring electronic tags on all cattle over 18 months, the association’s executive vice president, Sarah Ryan, said.

WSDA says it intends to

supply producers with free radio tags, but that depends on funding from USDA.

“It’s going to cost somebody,” Wishon said. “The money is coming from some place. They’re not free.”

WSDA estimates 5 percent of beef cattle and 80 percent of dairy cows are currently fitted with radio tags. The department did not have an estimate of how the new rules would increase those percentages, but the regulations could apply to a large number of cattle.

Approximately 200,000 head of cattle were sold at four public livestock markets in 2016, according to WSDA. Some 151,371 female cattle were vaccinated for brucellosis, and 2,697 bulls were tested for trichomoniasis, the department reported.

WSDA says the state’s 2003 case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly known as mad cow disease, showed that one diseased animal can close export markets for years. Tracing where a sick cow has been by its brand is not feasible because the brand does not individually identify the animal, according to WSDA.

The department said it doesn’t expect to draft the rules or take public comments before mid-March. Agencies are required to give notice that they plan to write rules.



EO Media Group File

A Central Washington farmer faces steep fines for using water from the Odessa aquifer to irrigate his fields.

Farmer, landowners fined \$618K for drawing from Odessa aquifer

Farmer, landowner plan to appeal

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

A Grant County, Wash., farmer and the landowners he leased fields from have been fined a total of \$618,000 by the state Department of Ecology for illegally drawing from the shrinking Odessa aquifer to irrigate 530 acres this year.

Ecology alleges that Ron Fode continued to irrigate after he and the landowners were told more than once last spring to stop.

“This isn’t fair to other irrigators who follow the law or to local communities and rural landowners who depend on this groundwater for their drinking water,” Ecology water resources manager Mary Verner said in a written statement.

Ecology said it formally ordered Fode and the landowners to stop irrigating three fields on June 26. The irrigation continued until Oct. 10, Ecology said.

Ecology issued three separate fines: \$103,000 for irrigating 65 acres of alfalfa owned by the estate of Michael Schmidt, \$206,000 for irrigating 130 acres of Timothy hay owned by Fode and

\$309,000 for irrigating 335 acres of alfalfa and potatoes owned by Michele and Randy Kiesz, Ritzville farmers.

Fode applied in January to transfer groundwater rights to the 130 acres he owns. Ecology denied the transfer on the grounds the land could be irrigated by surface water, rather than the dwindling aquifer.

Fode tried to challenge Ecology’s June order to stop irrigating, but his appeal to the Pollution Control Hearings board missed a filing deadline by a few days. The board dismissed the appeal without considering the 61 pages of documents Fode submitted.

Fode said that he will appeal Ecology’s fine to the hearings board. “I haven’t even had my day in court,” he said. Fode said he kept irrigating because he would have suffered irreparable damage if he had stopped.

Michele Kiesz said Fode rented the land for \$100 an acre, and the well is dry.

“Whatever water was being applied to my rented land, I was not knowledgeable about,” she said.

She said she and her husband will appeal the fine to the Pollution Control Hearings Board. “It’s not a fun situation, and we’re trying to rectify it,” she said.

UI Extension equips new farmers for success

Program includes farmer instructors, farm tours

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

University of Idaho Extension will offer a workshop for beginning farmers starting Jan. 8.

The “Starting Your Sustainable Small Farm in Idaho” workshop begins with an in-

troductory webinar at 6 p.m. Pacific time on Jan. 8.

The registration deadline is Jan. 6.

“We consider beginning farmers to be anyone with no experience with up to 10 years of experience,” said Iris Mayes, UI Extension Latah County small farms and horticulture educator in Moscow.

The workshop will help students develop whole-farm planning that fits their operation.

“We try to give them a

broad overview so they can figure out what it is they want to do, and how they’re going to make a living at this,” Mayes said. “We want to empower people to be successful.”

Farmers’ plans can be adjusted as they learn more, she added.

“When you first start thinking, ‘I want to do this,’ you’re excited, you’re dreaming,” she said. “This gives people a really great foundation for doing that successfully, and having a good time doing it, too. Peo-

ple can work really hard on the farm, and we want (them) to enjoy that lifestyle, too.”

The workshop includes farmers as instructors, to provide real-world experience, Mayes said.

The workshop includes three all-day sessions from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Pacific time Jan. 13., Feb. 3 and March 3. A speaker will be broadcast to classrooms in Bonners Ferry, Caldwell, Cascade, Driggs, Moscow, Sandpoint, Kamiah and Weiser.

Senators question USFS role in sage grouse review

Letter sent Dec. 20 to agency head Tony Tooke

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

Thirteen Democratic senators, including Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, are questioning what role the U.S. Forest Service played in the Trump administration’s recent decision to review protections for the greater sage grouse.

In a letter sent Dec. 20 to USFS Chief Tony Tooke, the senators pose 10 questions stemming from federal orders to review the 2015 sage grouse plans, which sought to keep the bird off the endangered species list.

Those plans, the senators argue, were the hard-won results of negotiations between farmers, ranchers, sportsmen, conservationists and government officials to preserve sage grouse habitat while balancing rural economies. On June 7, however, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke issued an order to re-examine the plans to see if any provisions might hinder job creation and energy development.

Since then, the Forest Service has also announced its intent to prepare an environmental impact statement for multiple national forests and grasslands in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and Colorado, which the agency says may warrant changes in land management for the sage grouse. The notice includes:

- Idaho and southwest Montana (Beaverhead-Deerlodge, Boise, Caribou-Targhee, Salmon-Challis and Sawtooth national forests, and Curlew National Grassland).
- Nevada (Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest).



File photo

The greater sage grouse. Thirteen Democratic senators, including Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, are questioning what role the U.S. Forest Service played in the Trump administration’s recent decision to review protections for the greater sage grouse.

- Utah (Ashley, Dixie, Fishlake, Manti-La Sal and Uinta-Wasatch-Cache national forests).
- Wyoming and Colorado (Bridger-Teton and Medicine Bow-Routt national forests, and Thunder Basin National Grassland).

The deadline for comment is Jan. 5, though the senators are asking the Forest Service to extend it by at least 45 days to account for the acreage and stakeholders involved.

Sage grouse are found in 11 Western states, and are known for their elaborate courtship and mating rituals. The population was once estimated at 16 million birds, but has since dwindled to between 200,000 and 500,000. More than half the remaining habitat is on land managed by the Forest Service or the BLM.

In addition to Wyden and Merkley, the Dec. 20 letter was signed by Washington Sens. Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray; New Mexico Sens. Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich; Montana Sen. Jon Tester; Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet; Nevada Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto; California Sen. Dianne Feinstein;

Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow; Maryland Sen. Chris Van Hollen; and Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed.

Among their questions, they ask how the Forest Service was involved in working with the Department of the Interior on its recommendation to review sage grouse plans, and if the agency held meetings with local stakeholders.

They also ask why the USFS is considering changes when the BLM’s National Technical Team, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Conservation Objectives Team, the U.S. Geological Survey’s Summary Report and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies all agreed on key elements in the final 2015 sage grouse plans.

“Because of the profound economic and cultural implications of upending this range-wide solution — including a potential endangered Species Act listing of the sage grouse that could result from USFS and BLM changes to the 2015 plans — we ask that you respond to the following questions and requests for information by Jan. 12, 2018,” the senators write.

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