Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

David Willms, policy adviser to Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead, talks about the Western Governors' Association's initiative to reform the Endangered Species Act during the Idaho Water Users Association's water law conference in Sun Valley on June 11.

Governors recommend specific ESA reforms

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

SUN VALLEY, Idaho — An effort by the Western Governors' Association to bring stakeholders together to reform the Endangered Species Act has produced a list of recommendations for making species conservation more collaborative — and more effective.

The ESA hasn't been substantively amended in 30 years, and going it alone to reform the statute hasn't worked, David Willms, policy adviser to Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead, told the Idaho Water Users Association's water law conference last week.

That's why in 2015 Mead, then chairman of the Western Governors' Association, began a governors' initiative to reform the ESA to at least come close to a consensus on how to make it work better, he said.

He wanted to "construct a process where the people involved inform the outcome," he said.

It started with a "big-tent" discussion, inviting people from all over the West to engage in a dialogue on what's working and what isn't.

The first year of the initiative was about building relationships and trust through meetings and webinars. Almost everyone agreed there are things that could be done better, he said.

The second year involved going beyond the "30,000-foot view" and drilling down on how the ESA needs to change, with the association making recommendations to the Interior Department, he said.

"Sue and settle is one of the biggest things," he said.

Strict deadlines that were not even in the original act but added in 1982 have created petition-driven lawsuits calling for ESA listings, with agencies paying out when they miss a deadline, he said.

The governors' recommendations include expanding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's seven-year work plan to prioritize petitions.

Species with on-ground conservation efforts would be placed lower on the list, he said.

That flexibility would give states time to let their conservation plans work, he said.

The litigation cycle makes it impossible for agencies to meet deadlines, Sam Eaton, legal counsel for Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, said.

The governors' recommendation would "allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to prioritize species in order of conservation need," he said.

If the agency had that flexibility, it would allow the ESA to be proactive, he said.

The recommendations also call for recovery planning and gives states the opportunity to lead recovery teams, Willms said.

The governors also recommended postponing the ability to sue Fish and Wildlife over a recovered species for five years once a species is delisted while the agency conducts monitoring reviews, he said.

That would allow the agency to show tangible results in the case of a subsequent lawsuit, he said.

Blueberry breeder expands internationally

Acquisition in the Netherlands marks Fall Creek's fourth foreign subsidiary

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

From left to right, Cort Brazelton, his sister Amelie Aust and father Dave Brazelton. The Brazelton family founded the Fall Creek Farm & Nursery. Fall Creek Farm & Nursery is continuing its international expansion with the acquisition of Driesvenplant in the Netherlands.

An Oregon blueberry breeding company has taken the next step in its international expansion by purchasing a nursery producer in the Netherlands.

Fall Creek Farm & Nursery of Lowell, Ore., has bought the Driesvenplant nursery company of Horst, the Netherlands, for an undisclosed sum, boosting its annual output of about 35 million blueberry plants by 10 percent.

"Hopefully, it will allow us to deliver new value to the blueberry industry," said Cort Brazelton, the firm's director of international business development.

The acquisition marks the fourth wholly-owned foreign subsidiary of Fall Creek Farm & Nursery, which began its global expansion in Mexico in 2012, followed by Peru in 2014 and Spain in 2016.

The company also licenses plant varieties and offers technical support to companies in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, South Korea and South Africa.

Driesvenplant is more than just an investment in the Netherlands, said Brazelton. The company gives Fall Creek a foothold in the market for "mid-chill" and "high-chill" blueberry plants in Northern and Eastern Europe, complementing its investment in "low-chill" climates.

"We were late to the business in Northern Europe. We were focused on different areas," he said. "We're going to become a better company if we do this right."

While Fall Creek has bred and propagated blueberries for that market, it will now have a "high tech grow-out nursery" developed by Driesvenplant, Brazelton said.

The Driessen family, which started the nursery, will retain their farming operation and horticultural technology interests, such as the "Easy Harvester" system for more efficient blueberry hand-picking.

"It's really the Silicon Valley of horticulture," Brazelton said of Driesvenplant's location.

Advances in blueberry genetics, mechanization and growing systems are becoming integrated to improve efficiency at a time of growing labor shortages around the world, he said.

The crop must be more attractive for consumers as well as profitable for growers, Brazelton said. "That doesn't come from one thing. That comes from the whole system."

Fall Creek has cooperated with Driesvenplant since the 1980s. Buying this longtime partner will help ensure product and service uniformity while offering the former owners more global reach, he said.

Brothers Marcel and Leon Driessen, the founders' sons, will stay on as technical adviser and operations manager, respectively.

Agricultural companies are transforming to adapt to labor shortages and other factors, Brazelton said.

That's particularly true for the blueberry industry, which is "no longer a niche business" even as it's still less than 10 percent of the global strawberry industry, he said.

"We're growing from a niche crop to a preferred, high-value commodity," Brazelton said. "It's going to be a different industry."

Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Heavy rains in the Boise area put a damper on hay production in the area.

Daylong rains prompt cherry, hay concerns

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Sally Symms

Daylong rains June 17 in parts of Idaho and Oregon stalled some hay growers and raised concerns about a cherry crop especially sensitive to heavy precipitation.

The greater Boise area received widespread rain, with greater amounts in some spots, said Troy Lindquist, a senior hydrologist with the National Weather Service in Boise. Parts of the Boise National Forest to the north and east of Boise received about a half inch of rain while the heaviest amounts, about an inch, fell in the Owyhee Mountains to the south and west, he said. That benefited the Owyhee Basin, where snowpack has been well below average.

Heavy rain can stall alfalfa hay production and reduce its feed nutrition value. For cherry producers — now in the middle of harvest in southwest Idaho — inopportune precipitation combined with other conditions can cause serious problems.

"We are still evaluating the effects," Sally Symms, who chairs the Idaho Cherry Commission and is vice president of sales with Symms Fruit Ranch west of Caldwell. "So far, because the weather has been cool, we are hoping it did not cause too many issues other than slowing us down a bit."

Cherries, high in sugar content as they ripen, can split if water stays on the fruit, especially if the weather is warm. At Symms Fruit Ranch west of Caldwell, it appeared cool weather and some light winds helped keep cherries healthy.

"Hopefully, because of the cool weather, any damage has been avoided," Symms said. She had not heard from other Idaho cherry growers as of midmorning June 18.

At Symms Fruit Ranch, "fortunately, we have a small gap in production," she said. Tieton cherry harvest started there June 12 and concluded June 16, the day before the rain, she said. Fruit size was larger than expected, leading to higher tonnage. She expected Bing cherry harvest to start June 20 and wrap up around June 28-30.

"We have had a fair bit of rain off and on the last little while," said Scott Jensen, University of Idaho Extension educator in Owyhee County. "The only calls or concerns have been guys trying to get hay up."

Jensen, based in Marsing, saw a hayfield on the rainy June 17. "It was double-raked and ready to go, and now it's soaking wet," he said. "It's going to have to be dried out and raked again so the other side can get dried."

Cutting, drying and baling comprise hay production, which sometimes includes raking during the drying step. Time is of the essence throughout the season, which typically yields four cuttings and sometimes five.

Heavy rainfall mainly causes problems for hay that is cut and on the ground, Jensen said. "Once it's cut, you don't want to see any rain until it's in the stack," he said.

"But sometimes, if they wait to cut — if they're looking for a window of some favorable weather — the hay is more mature and at some point starts to lose nutritional value and total dollar value," he said. In that case, hay can lose valuable leaf content and end up with more coarse stems.

Idaho Hay & Forage Association Vice President Ben McIntyre's family farms between Caldwell and Marsing, and processes hay for other growers. McIntyre Farms covers about 3,000 acres of hay cuttings combined on its own farm and for clients. The second cutting is starting in various locations in southwestern Idaho and southeastern Oregon, he said.

Too much moisture can mean fewer leaves in the bale and lower quality ratings as well as higher potential for mold, McIntyre said. Quality ratings also suffer when hay's characteristic green fades, indicating more nutrient loss.

"Most of this first cutting has been rained on from earlier storms we got from mid-May to the end of May," he said. "So probably only about 10 percent of the hay we put up (stacked) ended up being put up without rain."

Very little dairy-quality hay has been baled so far, McIntyre said. The season's first and fourth cuttings produce most of the high-quality hay that dairies demand, he said. The middle two cuttings, grown in higher temperatures, largely supply general cattle feeding.

Whether there is a fifth cutting each year depends on the first cutting, he said. "As long as it took to put the first cutting up this year, we will probably not get a fifth."

On June 18, McIntyre said he had recorded 1.4 inches of rain at McIntyre Farms in 36 hours, and heard reports of about double that amount on Idaho's east side.

IHFA President Will Ricks, a hay grower in Monteview said the past weekend's storm in Eastern Idaho followed the previous week's dry conditions that allowed some growers to put up hay. The first cutting remains under way in that area.

"Anytime during harvest, if you get rain, it's hard on hay," Ricks said. "You lose some feed value there. It's just part of Mother Nature. You just get used to it. It will work out over time."

UI Canyon County Extension Agent Jerry Neufeld, in Caldwell, said the steady rains June 17 probably helped many farmers except possibly growers who had not yet planted beans or corn.

Jensen said the rains likely help to improve cattle grazing conditions and reduce rangefire danger in the short term.

Longtime Spokane truck company closes after 50 years

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

SPOKANE VALLEY, Wash. — Mark Huber's customers are going to miss him.

The feeling is mutual.

"I've had a lot of tears with customers — when you get a hug and they tell you they love you, you know, you've done a good job," he said. "We worked with a lot of people who became my friends, they were like a family to us."

Huber closed the doors to Arlo Huber & Son Inc. May 31, after "50 years and one month."

His father, Arlo, started the trucking business. Mark joined his father at the age of 18. They had five trucks, took the number up to 31 in the 1990s and early 2000s and were down to 16 trucks at the time of closure.

The Hubers hauled grain, seed, hot oil, produce, fertilizer and livestock.

"We've pretty much hauled it all in the agricultural industry," Mark said.

Mark most enjoyed hauling grain and meeting new people around Washington, Idaho, Oregon and Montana.

Huber cites more customers buying their own trucks, the arrival of grain trains in the region and fewer farmers as reasons for the closure. Finding drivers is difficult, he said. Many of the people he worked with in recent years are retiring.

"There's not a lot of young people coming into farming or trucking, and that needs to change," he said. "I think it's going to get better for the industry in the long run."

Mark sold all 16 trucks in one day through word-of-mouth and is selling some trailers. He sold the grain trailer business Huber Trailer Sales to his son and nephew. Now 87, Arlo still goes to work there, he said.

Mark will focus on his rental properties and perhaps find a job.

"I've sat here and worried for 40 years about everybody else; I want to have no more worries," he said. "I just want to enjoy life."

"They will be sorely missed," said Hal Meenach, Valleyford, Wash., farmer and president of the Spokane County Farm Bureau.

Meenach said the trucking business closure means less access for farmers to a service they depend on. More farmers will need their own trucks, an expense that's out of reach except for larger-scale growers, he said.

Research identifies mastitis-prone cows

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Cows that produce milk early are more prone to develop mastitis, but this susceptibility can be detected with a blood test and countered with nutritional supplements, according to an animal scientist.

Gerd Bobe, an associate professor at Oregon State University, studied about 160 pregnant cows several weeks before they gave birth to calves, comparing those that eventually developed mastitis with those that didn't.

Carbohydrates associated with milk production, such as lactose, usually did not appear in a cow's blood until a few days before calving, he said.

Cattle that developed mastitis, however, had these metabolites in their blood three weeks before calving, indicating they'd begun producing milk early.

Also, cows don't usually lose weight from muscle and calf loss before calving, but those susceptible to mastitis started breaking down those tissues earlier, as evidenced by amino acids in their blood.

This "catabolic process" makes less energy available for the bovine immune system to fight off infection.

Aside from supplements to help these cows' immune systems, milking them before they calf could reduce the risk of infection by taking away the food source from pathogens, Bobe said.

"Also, there is less pressure in the mammary gland, which can cause damage to the tissue," he said.

By taking preventive steps before the cow becomes infected with mastitis, the dairy producer can avoid treating the udder infection with antibiotics and generating unusable milk, he said.

Preventing unnecessary antibiotic use would have the added benefit of reducing the opportunity for pathogens to build up a resistance to the drugs, Bobe said.

The ability to produce milk for a longer period of time also leaves the cow more vulnerable to pathogens, which is particularly true with older animals that are more prone to inflammation, he said.

Bobe hopes the dairy industry can use his findings to develop a simple test that would enable dairy farmers to quickly identify cows that would benefit from preventive treatments.

Reducing mastitis would also decrease the need to cull cows that suffer from chronic infections, he said.