

Sheep shearing is for women, too

By CRAIG REED
For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — Katherine Ritchie was up to the challenge when it was implied that shearing sheep was a man's job.

Several months later, the young woman from the Roseburg area attended a shearing school at Washington State University in Pullman. She has now been shearing for six years.

"It is very physically demanding work, very mentally demanding," she said during a break at a four-day shearing school on the Dawson Ranch. She was an instructor at the school that attracted four teenagers, one being a female, and one adult.

"You have to convince yourself to grab another sheep," said the 25-year-old Ritchie. "When you are standing around feeling tired, no sheep are getting shorn."

Because of the physicality of holding a 150-pound ewe or a slightly lighter lamb between your knees and feet while working electric blades over the animal's skin to remove the wool fleece, shearing is not a job that attracts many women.

Ritchie was inspired to learn how to handle sheep and the clippers back when she was helping push her family's sheep through a chute and into a shearing trailer. She said it was a 100-degree day so she had stepped inside the trailer for some shade when a member of the shearing crew made a sexist comment, insinuating that since she was a girl, she couldn't handle shearing.

Ritchie has since advanced to where she is not only a full-time shearer, but also an instructor. She has also earned the respect of that person who inspired her and they are now friends. In addition to instructing five students at the recent Dawson Ranch school, she was an instructor at a week-long school at Washington State University in April.

"You really have to want to



Katherine Ritchie, left, instructs student Chloe Fink on the proper techniques of using shears and holding a sheep while removing the fleece from the animal. Women sheep shearers are rare and there is a need for more shearers so Ritchie was happy to be instructing at a school where the five students included one female, Fink.

do this," she said of shearing. "You have to want to learn. You have to learn how to hold them (sheep) and to have the proper footwork."

Wendy Wyatt Valentine of Langlois, Ore., and Diane Isenhardt of Coquille, Ore., are both long-time shearers. They both got into it because shearing is in their family's history, dating back several generations. Their fathers, Fred Wyatt and Hank Isenhardt, were on some shearing crews together.

Wendy Valentine, who is 53, and Diane Isenhardt, 42, agree that there aren't many women in the profession. They admit it is hard work, but add that women can do it and that there is a need for more shearers.

"It's a tough world, it's a man's world, it really is," Isenhardt said of shearing. "But I'm not saying a woman can't do it. You just need to learn the physics of it, how to do it the easiest way because we're not built like men and we're not as strong as men. If you learn to do it right, if you learn how to control the animal, then you can still get that big sheep sheared."

Valentine said she is happy to see anybody get into the shearing business because many older shearers, like herself, are easing up on the num-

ber of sheep they are shearing and there is a need for younger people in the profession.

"It's a male-dominated profession, but even though we're built different, we can still shear sheep," she said of women.

When she was 20, Isenhardt traveled to New Zealand and sheared 250 lambs in a nine-hour day. On that same trip, she did 204 ewes in an eight-hour day.

Valentine, when she was in her early 20s, sheared 208 sheep in just under eight hours. She stopped because there were no more sheep.

Isenhardt said that now she just does small flocks of sheep, but she still loves working with the animals.

"You don't do something for 28 years and not like it," she said. "Anybody can shear sheep, it is just a matter of whether you're going to shear the second one and then the 10th one when your body begins to hurt."

Valentine said the only women she knows in western Oregon who have been shearing full-time are Isenhardt and Ritchie.

While Valentine and Isenhardt are shearing less, Ritchie has been working on some bigger jobs that have ranged up to a few thousand animals.

In addition to Oregon, she has sheared in Washington, Montana, California and North Dakota. She was planning to attend an advanced shearing school in South Dakota this month.

"There's always more to be learned," she said of shearing. "There's always little things you can learn to be better."

Ritchie doesn't mind sharing those details with students at shearing schools because she has seen first-hand that there is a need for more shearers. She explained that if a veteran shearer is injured and can't continue, that's up to 200 animals a day that aren't being sheared, putting a shearing crew behind and there's only a few spring months to get the job done.

At the Dawson Ranch school, 19-year-old Chloe Fink was learning how to shear under the guidance of Ritchie. Fink had learned how to clip lambs for show during her 4-H years, but now she was learning shearing techniques.

"I think we're just as capable," Fink said. "Men are stronger, they have natural-born strength, so sometimes we (women) just have to work smarter than harder."

Reclamation chief revitalizes agency's infrastructure mission

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press



Brenda Burman

SUN VALLEY, Idaho — The Trump administration is ringing in a new era at the Bureau of Reclamation, one that harkens back to earlier days of ambitious water-storage projects.

The administration and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke are "very focused" on infrastructure, and Reclamation wants to partner with water users to bring new projects forward, Brenda Burman, Bureau of Reclamation commissioner, said during the Idaho Water Users Association water law conference last week.

"We are here and ready to work on projects, infrastructure in the West. Take advantage of that. It's not that big a window. It's going to go by incredibly fast," she said.

From her perspective, Reclamation has the most impressive and important mission in the country: finding ways to provide a reliable water supply in wet years and dry years — whether it's flooding or drought, she said.

"Reclamation helped settle the West. In a lot of ways, I feel like we lost our path in doing those big projects," she said.

The pioneers in western water storage wanted to ensure a reliable water supply 20, 40, 50 years down the road and built big infrastructure, she said.

"In some ways, that's skipped a generation. It's not building storage in the last generation that has us behind today," she said.

But the agency is now focusing on infrastructure and how to make it reliable for the next 40 years, and Congress is providing opportunity.

The House just passed the Fiscal Year 2019 appropriations bill providing more than \$1.5 billion for Reclamation,

and a similar bill is awaiting a full Senate vote, she said.

Both bills represent an increase of more than \$400 million over the agency's current budget.

"It's our job with you to take advantage of this. We need to make sure we're thinking big," she said.

Going forward, infrastructure is the absolute key to a reliable water supply, and there is a need for more projects in Idaho, she said.

"My goal in the next couple of years is to have Idaho projects on the map. We want to have your back and be a partner with you in bringing projects forward," she said.

She encouraged water users to get the backing for projects they'd like see, work with regional leadership and bring the details to Reclamation.

Reclamation recommends projects to Congress for authorization, and Idaho needs to be ready to compete, she said, adding that California is already primed with projects for consideration.

The agency is currently conducting a feasibility study on increasing water storage in the Boise River system by potentially raising the Arrowrock Dam about 10 feet and the Anderson Ranch Dam about 6 feet, she said.

At the national level, water infrastructure sometimes gets lost in water quality and flooding issues — such as the Flint, Mich., lead issue and flooding from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, she said.

"We need to keep western water infrastructure at the top of the conversation," she said.

Integrated Biological Systems buys Texas supplier

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Integrated Biological Systems Inc. of Nampa, Idaho, has purchased BioPlus Manufacturing of Hawkins, Texas, adding capability and reach in the market of farming products designed to replace or complement fertilizer and enhance soil efficiency.

Angela and Marvin Miller, and their son, Aaron, own Integrated Biological Systems, founded in Nampa in 1986. BioPlus Manufacturing, founded 42 years ago, is a longtime supplier of IBS' bio-enhancement products. Financial details of the transaction were not released.

Acquiring BioPlus gives IBS its own manufacturing operation, an opportunity to accelerate research and development, and more avenues for marketing. Marvin Miller said in an interview. The acquisition also boosts IBS' capabilities to improve existing products, develop new products and work with other biological ag compa-



Marvin Miller of Integrated Biological Systems checks field peas near Nyssa, Ore.

nies to bring in some of their technologies, he said.

"We are going to be a

lot more capable of improving the products even though in the last three years

we have had tremendous breakthroughs and improvements in the products," he said.

Revenues have grown recently at IBS and in agriculture's biological enhancement segment in general, Miller said. Major agricultural chemical companies also are buying bio enterprises.

"Input costs are one thing driving an increase in sales in the industry in general," he said. "The other thing is that farmers are beginning to understand that soil improvement is very important."

Biological companies such as IBS and the newly acquired BioPlus essentially deal with enzymes that work as probiotics in soil.

Miller said fertilizers can improve mineral content in soil but often cannot improve soil's ability to take

up water, get rid of sodium and herbicide carryover, and the like. Enzymes can make fertilizers work more efficiently.

"Usually we find ways to save money on other inputs to offset the cost of our programs," he said.

The basic idea of using amendments is to improve soil's structure and help create a better environment for soil microbes to work, said Stuart Reitz, an Oregon State University Extension agent in Ontario. If used, amendments should be put in well before planting so any biological processes they trigger have sufficient time to play out, he said.

IBS works with farms of all sizes and a variety of crops. One of its products, available on a limited basis now and slated for wider rollout later this year, is de-

signed to increase sugars in plants such as sugar beets. The company continues to test products for release next year, one formulated to help preserve silage — which can mold on top — and another using enzymes to suppress harmful insects.

"They have been on the docket for a while, but what we can do now is — knowing how it's manufactured — go about a new process of developing these products," Miller said.

The IBS office and distribution center has a staff of four including the owners. IBS has an independent distributor, Red Nova Nutritional, in Filer, Idaho. The acquired BioPlus has two employees and a consultant.

Miller said no staff changes are planned now, though headcount could increase as demand warrants.

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