

Agricultural water scrutiny increases in Oregon

Farm advocates wary of heavier government hand

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Growing scrutiny of agricultural water quality in Oregon is worrying farm advocates who fear a more heavy-handed government role in directing landowner pollution control efforts.

Agricultural water quality was discussed at the two most recent quarterly meetings of Oregon's Environmental Quality Commission, which oversees the Department of Environmental Quality, the state's chief environmental regulator.

While DEQ is the main

agency charged with implementing the federal Clean Water Act in Oregon, it's the Oregon Department of Agriculture that actually enforces water regulations on farmland.

Officials with DEQ recently showcased mapping tools that display where "designated management agencies" — including ODA, the Oregon Department of Forestry and local governments — have jurisdiction over watersheds with pollution problems.

The tool can help regulators visualize the potential source of pollution, such as bacteria from pasture runoff, to enlist the appropriate regulators for outreach and enforcement.

When using such tools, the DEQ needs to be careful to avoid a "big brother feel," said Greg Addington, executive director of the Resource Edu-

cation and Agricultural Leadership Oregon program and EQC's newest member.

"A lot of this can be scary for landowners," he said.

Richard Whitman, DEQ's director, responded that regulators are simply refining their methods to understand what's happening on the ground and why, but the data isn't intended to directly impose conditions on landowners.

"Much of this is not necessarily going to be done through regulation," Whitman said.

However, environmental groups are pressing DEQ to step up its enforcement of "nonpoint" sources of pollution, such as agriculture.

For example, the Trout Unlimited nonprofit has complained that management plans for agricultural water quality don't reflect the best science

and don't sufficiently measure whether progress is being made.

The criticism prompted several farmers and agriculture advocates to defend the state's current approach during the EQC's most recent meeting in Portland, where they argued the compliance program should remain flexible and outcome-oriented instead of dictating practices to landowners.

Over time, the focus on water quality among regulators and environmentalists has progressed from point sources of pollution — such as factories — to forestry and now agriculture, said Mary Anne Cooper, general counsel for public policy with the Oregon Farm Bureau.

Farm advocates need to proactively address those con-

cerns, such as with DEQ's ongoing revision of the water quality standard for mercury in the Willamette River basin, she said.

The agency is racing to change that standard, known as the total maximum daily load or TMDL, by next April to comply with a federal court order.

During a recent meeting on the matter in Keizer, Cooper and other natural resource industry representatives objected to a DEQ "brainstorming session" about possible "best management practices" for managing mercury pollution from soil erosion.

Officials with DEQ said the suggestions would simply help the Oregon Department of Agriculture and Oregon Department of Forestry with their compliance programs.

However, industry representatives fear the discussion may signal DEQ will try to bypass local advisory committees on water quality and dictate how ODA and ODF should do their jobs.

"That's not how it's supposed to work. It's supposed to be locally driven," said Cooper.

Oregon's existing system for regulating erosion from agriculture and forestry is already effective but isn't adequately funded, said Jeff Stone, executive director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

There's broad support for ODA's agricultural water quality program among growers, who want to reduce erosion, he said. "No ag operation wants to lose their soil."



Capital Press File

Northwest wheat industry representatives have all expressed optimism that this year's wheat crop will have high quality and yields.

As harvest gets underway, NW wheat crop looks 'superb'

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Wheat harvest has begun in the Pacific Northwest, and industry leaders report high yields and good crop conditions.

"Statewide, the crop is looking superb," said Blaine Jacobson, executive director of the Idaho Wheat Commission. "We're keeping our fingers crossed that we have a good four or five weeks of ideal harvest weather."

The leaders of the region's other grain and wheat commissions echoed his optimism.

Harvest has begun in three-quarters of Idaho, particularly lower-elevation and high-temperature regions, he said. Farmers are in their fields in North Idaho, Southwest Idaho and South Central Idaho.

Some parts of the state won't begin harvest until August, at which point it should be in full swing everywhere, he said.

Some hail storms have occurred, but not enough to impact quality, he said.

Yields in general are up, with no low falling number test results indicating starch damage, Jacobson said.

"There's the typical issues, but I wouldn't say there's anything that's extraordinary," he said. "The weather was cooperative this year."

Temperatures mostly ranged in the 80s and 90s, topping 100 in only a few areas, he said.

Oregon wheat harvest kicked off the week of July 9, said Blake Rowe, Oregon Wheat CEO, and will ramp up in the coming weeks.

Rowe cited average to above-average yields on soft white wheat with low protein, good moisture and test weights above 60 pounds.

"Prices are a little better than last year at this time,"

Rowe said.

Soft white wheat sells for \$5.80 to \$5.90 per bushel on the Portland market. Hard red winter wheat ranges from \$5.81 to \$6.56 per bushel, depending on protein content. Dark northern spring wheat ranges from \$5.88 to \$6.76 per bushel, depending on protein percentage.

That's above the cost of production for some farmers, but certainly not all, Rowe said.

Rowe has heard a few reports of lower protein levels in hard red winter wheat, but said there weren't enough to say much of anything yet.

Higher protein is desired in the red wheats, which is used for bread and rolls, and lower protein is desired in soft white wheat, which is used for sponge cakes and crackers.

Dark northern spring wheat in Washington is averaging a little higher than 14 percent protein, hard red winter wheat 12 percent protein and soft white wheat about 10 percent protein.

"It's early," Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission. "Everything's getting started."

USDA is projecting a winter wheat yield of 76 bushels per acre in Washington. If that materializes, it would be the second-highest yield for the state, and a slight drop from 78 bushels per acre last year, Squires said.

USDA projects 45 bushels per acre for spring wheat, a mid-way point for the state.

"There have been a bunch lower and a bunch higher," Squires said.

Squires expects some pockets of low falling number, the starch damage problem that affects the wheat's baking and noodle quality. The industry is aware and prepared, he said, and will keep wheat with extremely low falling numbers separate from wheat with a higher falling number.

Eastern Oregon wheat harvest off to fiery start

Farmer loses 50 acres to blaze

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

Wheat harvest is off to a blazing start in Eastern Oregon — literally.

Emery Gentry, who farms about 500 acres of wheat near the small town of Weston, was taken by surprise when he got the phone call July 12 that one of the fields he leases had somehow caught fire.

"I was working with my harvest partners in the Hermiston area when I got the call," Gentry said. "There was nothing I could do."

Flames devoured roughly 50 acres of standing wheat and burned right up to nearby homes, prompting evacuation orders for some residents until firefighters could contain the blaze.

One day later, fire broke out again up the Walla Walla River in Cash Hollow, southeast of Milton-Freewater, torching several hundred acres of dry grass and wheat. The Substation Fire burning east of The Dalles in Wasco and Sherman counties has also grown to more than 29,000 acres as of Wednesday morning and is threatening homes and farms, prompting mandatory evacuations.

The incidents underscore just how hot and dry it has been leading up to this year's dryland wheat harvest, exacerbating the risk of field and rangeland fires.

Average high temperatures so far in July have reached 90



Brittany Norton/EO Media Group

A fire burned fields and approached the city of Weston July 12, but crews stopped it from damaging any homes.

degrees in Pendleton and Yakima, Wash., and 95 degrees in Hermiston, according to the National Weather Service. A red flag warning indicating heightened fire danger was also in effect through Wednesday evening from Pendleton west to The Dalles and as far south as Bend.

Gentry said he is not certain how the fire started in his unharvested wheat. Casey Kump, deputy state fire marshal based in La Grande, said the fire started in a corner of the property that includes a shop and barn, and appears to be accidental.

When he first heard the news, Gentry immediately called his father, who went out in a water truck and was soon joined by neighbors bringing additional trucks and disc plows to dig firebreaks.

"We have a truck with water on it all the time. People always have tractors hooked up to discs," Gentry said. "My friends and neighbors dropped what they were doing and immediately came to the rescue. I'm really grateful for that."

As a beginning farmer,

Gentry said it hurts to lose 10 percent of his crop. He needs every acre he can get, but he knows the situation could have been much worse.

Gentry said it has been at least a month since the area received any significant rain, and farmers need to be on their toes for fires, keeping ignition sources and idling engines away from dry grass and stubble.

"The biggest thing obviously is just common sense," he said.

Gentry expects to begin harvest by next week. Harvesting is already underway at lower elevations farther south and west, where forecasts seem to be a mixed bag.

Don Wysocki, soil scientist

for Oregon State University Extension in Pendleton, said most of the lower elevations in Morrow and Gilliam counties were short on rainfall during May and June, and he expects they may cut around 10-15 bushels of wheat per acre below average.

"The fall stands were good, and the crop looked pretty good all through winter and early spring," Wysocki said. "But (precipitation) didn't happen in May."

To make matters more difficult, Wysocki said conditions for spraying grassy herbicides in spring were less than ideal, causing problems with cheatgrass and other weeds in some fields.



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Tires LES SCHWAB Weekly fieldwork report

Item/description (Source: USDA, NASS; NOAA)	Ore.	Wash.	Idaho	Calif.
• Days suitable for fieldwork (As of July 15)	6.9	6.9	6.9	7
• Topsoil moisture, surplus	0	0	9%	0
• Topsoil moisture, percent short	72%	45%	40%	80%
• Subsoil moisture, surplus	0	1%	9%	0
• Subsoil moisture, percent short	69%	37%	38%	75%
• Precipitation probability (6-10 day outlook as of July 10)	33-50% Below/Normal	50% below	50% below	33-40% Below/Normal

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