Idaho organic inspection program at capacity

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Brad Carlson/Capital Press

Gwen Ayres, Idaho State Department of Agriculture organic program manager.

Idaho's organic certification program has become so popular in the last few years that the state Department of Agriculture capped applications to make sure it wasn't growing beyond the agency's ability to service the growing constituency.

ISDA in August 2017 stopped taking new applications for organic certifications to ensure it was providing high-quality service to existing certified operations. The number of certified organic food operations was up 40 percent from four years earlier. Department budgets for 2016, 2017 and this year included funding for additional inspectors.

"We have made significant progress towards being able to lift the cap," said Chanel Tewalt, Idaho State Department of Agriculture communications officer. "We have added additional personnel, and we hope to lift the cap as soon as possible."

She would not estimate when the cap on new applications would be lifted.

ISDA certifies 260 operations as organic. Of those, 141 are for crops only and 18 are for crops and food handling. Seventy-four are certified for handling only, 23 for crops and livestock, and two for crops, handling and livestock. One is certified for handling and livestock, and one for livestock only.

The department said it certifies 16 Idaho dairies, but 12 others are handled by Oregon certifiers.

Training timetables posed a challenge initially. ISDA Organic Program Manager Gwen Ayres said organic-certification inspectors handle different scopes of work, such as analyzing crop and livestock production, and food handling. A new hire could be ready to inspect a single scope in around two months, but it could be a year before that inspector takes on the full range of organic operations.

Tewalt said the department hasn't finalized its proposed budget for the Idaho Legislature to consider in its session that begins in January. But no organic-related proposal is slated above and beyond maintaining the existing program, she said.

The program has 7 1/2 full-time equivalent positions, compared to three plus a few contract inspectors in 2015. Ayres said she expects certifications to grow again after ISDA resumes its acceptance of new applications.

Demand for organic food has been increasing substantially in recent years, she said.

According to ISDA, the organic market has grown nationally by about 10 percent a year since 2010 and is projected to continue. U.S. sales of organic food increased from $3.6 billion in 1997 to $31.5 billion in 2013, the agency said.

A 2016 report by the Organic Trade Association said 82 percent of U.S. households were buying organic products. State totals included 88 percent in Idaho, 92 percent in Washington, 91 percent in Oregon and 90 percent in California.

Organic certification is a process certification for agricultural products defined by USDA's National Organic Program.

Any product sold as organic in the U.S. must be certified as meeting the requirements specified by federal regulation. For example, operations must be free of genetically engineered materials and many synthetic materials and be buffered from non-organic lands.

ISDA became a certifying agent at the request of industry in the early 2000s. The agency certifies about 78 percent of organic operations in Idaho, and additional producers in Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, Utah, Tennessee and Wisconsin.

Certificates don't expire, but ISDA renews them every year based on updated details about the operations and an inspection, Ayres said.

USDA recently has focused on traceability — making sure foods maintain organic integrity throughout their journey from farm to table — and supply-chain integrity, she said. The latter generally refers to "making sure all hands the product passes through are meeting standards," she said.

Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Drew Katz, transition coordinator with the Oregon Tilth organic certification agency, speaks to farmers during an Aug. 15 tour of organic hazelnut orchards.

Organic hazelnut growers face numerous challenges

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Organic hazelnuts can fetch a premium price but growing them without conventional tools also leaves farmers prone to unforeseen risks, according to experts.

Farmers who cultivate hazelnuts organically — or aspire to do so — learned about dealing with the challenges during an Aug. 15 tour of operations near Lebanon and Scio, Ore., organized by the Organic Hazelnut Growers Association.

Without access to most chemical sprays, organic growers have to be creative in battling the multitude of pests and diseases that can afflict the crop, according to speakers.

"You really can't just do it for the return. It's a different system of farming if you're not used to it," said Drew Katz, transition coordinator for Oregon Tilth, an organic certifier.

One scourge facing organically grown hazelnut trees is Eastern Filbert Blight, a fungal pathogen that conventional growers can fight with systemic fungicides.

Organic farmers can treat their orchards with copper but the substance must be re-applied after rain, requiring multiple applications during the storm season.

Copper can also build up in the soil to the point that it's toxic to the trees, said Nik Wiman, an Oregon State University orchard specialist. "It can hurt plant growth in the long term."

Keeping the orchard floor clean in preparation for harvest is also more labor-intensive without the "chemical mow" offered by herbicides, requiring the planting of cover crops as well as mowing and tillage.

Sharp-point fluvellin is a problem weed that can wrap around components of harvesting equipment and has spread through an organic orchard owned by Chess Ag Full Harvest Partners, an investment firm.

Don Hatai, the company's farm manager, said he's thinking about planting perennial grasses to "shade out" the weed, but may need to switch back to conventional treatments to control it.

In general, it's advisable to establish an orchard block with conventional methods before transitioning it to organic production, Hatai said. "You need to get that tree to grow."

For example, there's no organic spray to control flathead borers, which tend to feed on younger trees, he said. Once they reach about five years, though, the insect doesn't inflict as much damage.

Disrupting the reproduction of filbertworms — which eat kernels — with pheromone treatments can control their populations in organic orchards.

However, mating disruption is most effective at keeping the number of insects low, rather than treating an orchard that is already teeming with them.

"You can't manage a big population," Wiman said.

Organic farmers can spray for filbertworms with Entrust, a biopesticide, which has a "synergistic effect" when combined with neem oil, he said. The worry is that growers are becoming too reliant on the chemical, threatening its effectiveness.

To transition to organic production, an orchard cannot be treated with a prohibited substance for three years.

USDA, beef industry dispute Consumer Reports article

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

An article appearing last week in Consumer Reports calling into question the safety of USDA-inspected meat and poultry is drawing fire from USDA and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

The article purports that data on drug residue from the USDA Food Inspection and Safety Service, as well as other information and interviews, "raise serious concerns about the safeguards put in place to protect the U.S. meat supply."

It also questions FSIS testing standards and enforcement actions and livestock producers' integrity, raising alarm about health risks to consumers, the USDA and NCBA said.

"This story is sensational and fear-based infotainment aimed at confusing shoppers with pseudoscience and scare tactics," Carmen Rottenberg, USDA acting deputy undersecretary for food safety, said a statement.

The article — "What's Really in Your Meat?" — "draws false and misleading conclusions meant to deceive consumers and reduce the consumption of meat," NCBA stated.

The article stemmed from a March 2017 Freedom of Information Act request. In its haste to be transparent, FSIS mistakenly released unconfirmed, preliminary test results for samples taken from poultry, Rottenberg said.

"We corrected our mistake with the requestor. However, the unconfirmed sampling results continue to be passed around as accurate, truthful information — they are not," she said.

The data released in error were the results of an initial screening, without the follow-up testing included. The screening instrument very often produces a response, which is why FSIS completes the screening process using controls and other evidence to determine if the responses are confirmed and reproducible, she said. The final, confirmed and validated test results showed there were no drug residues in the chicken. If violative drug residues are found, FSIS does not allow the product to be sold for human consumption, she said.

"FSIS scientists spoke with Consumer Reports multiple times to explain this information, but Consumer Reports scientists failed to evaluate all the scientific results and methods objectively," she said.

The path chosen by Consumer Reports does nothing to protect or inform and will only serve to create doubts about safety in the minds of consumers, NCBA said.

Washington utility district raises cryptocurrency power rates

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

EPHRATA, Wash. — Electricity rates for cryptocurrency miners and other evolving-industry firms will increase 15 percent next year, 35 percent in 2020 and 50 percent in 2021 in Grant County.

The new Rate 17, adopted Aug. 28 by Grant County Public Utility District commissioners, is designed to charge those customers more than the cost of production to protect the PUD from risk and preserve below-cost rates for core customers such as residents, small businesses and farm irrigators.

Other big power users already pay rates that are above the cost of production.

Adoption of the new rates follows nearly a year of analysis and public comment.

"Your industry is unregulated and high-risk. This is the best way to ensure our ratepayers are not impacted," Commissioner Tom Flint told a handful of cryptocurrency miners who attended the meeting.

Commissioners differentiated crypto mining from Quincy data centers, which own land, buildings, pay taxes and have solid credit records.

Since summer of 2017, Grant PUD has received new service inquires for more than 2,000 megawatts of power — more than three times the electricity needed to power all Grant County homes, farms, businesses and industries. Approximately 75 percent of those requests are from cryptocurrency miners, who operate large, power-hungry computer setups that "mine" online cryptocurrencies such as bitcoins.

Evolving-industry customers who would otherwise pay a residential rate (Rate 1) of 4.9 cents per kilowatt-hour on a monthly average use of 5,000 kilowatt-hour would instead pay 13.7 cents per kilowatt-hour on monthly use anticipated to average 20,000 kilowatt-hour over the three-year phase in.

Larger evolving-industry customers (formerly Rate 7) whose billing demand is 2 megawatts and a load factor of 92.5 percent would see their rates increase from 2.6 cents per kilowatt-hour to 7.9 cents over the three-year phase in.

In both examples, the impact of Rate 17 will vary by customer, depending on energy use above or below the average load of their customer class as a whole, the PUD said.

PUD policy requires power applicants from agriculture, manufacturing and other traditional industries to be fully addressed before the PUD considers hooking up new evolving-industry customers. Evolving-industry customers must also pay up-front costs of lines, poles, transformers, other equipment and studies needed to expand or connect service.