

Three-peat: Wheat farmer wins national yield contest

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Phillip Gross and the Warden Hutterian Brethren won the National Wheat Foundation's annual wheat yield contest for the third time since it began three years ago, topping 200 bushels per acre for the first time.

Gross represents the Warden Hutterians with his entry. His irrigated winter wheat yielded 202.5 bushels per acre.

The group planted the Limagrain Cereal Seeds hard red winter wheat variety LCS Jet.

Gross said the group tried to address fertility issues on the crop, keeping the plants healthy and never wanting.

"It was a little surprising, since we didn't quite have the tillers, the head counts, that we were shooting for, but the kernel size was very large and



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

Phillip Gross, with the Warden Hutterian Brethren in Warden, Wash., has won the national wheat yield contest for the third straight year.

nice, so it made up for some stuff that wasn't there," he told the Capital Press.

The group wants to increase the farm's efficiency and overall yield average, trying to get more production out of the same costs, Gross said.

"You never know what's going to happen, what the weather's going to throw at you," he said. "All you can do is try. It's all up to the good Lord to send favorable weather, and we just have to do our part and be good stewards."

Last year, Pacific Northwest wheat groups encouraged the foundation to set minimum quality benchmarks for the contest, which was already adding a quality requirement.

Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission, said the contest requires wheat to be No. 2 grade or better. It's a start, he said, but it's "clearly not a definitive component of quality."

The Northwest groups want milling and baking characteristics considered, Squires said.

"For example, if there's a hard red spring, it ought to make a loaf of bread," he said. "If a variety can't do that, it ought to kick it out."

NAWG is making progress, Squires said.

"I think the quality aspect of it is great, because it really encourages growers to try to maintain premium varieties and high end-use milling

qualities," Gross said. "I think it's a great addition to the contest."

The foundation is a nine-member board of directors and managed by staff members of the National Association of Wheat Growers.

Eighty-two growers from 23 states entered the competition this year, according to NAWG. The contest received 318 total entries.

Larry Carroll of Morrow County, Ore., placed first in irrigated spring wheat with a yield of 158.93 bushels per acre.

Jon Wert of Hettinger County, N.D., placed first in dryland spring wheat with a yield of 103.98 bushels per acre.

Ken Horton of Kearny County, Kan., placed first in irrigated winter wheat with a yield of 111.28 bushels per acre.

R&K Farms of Pine Bluffs,

Wyo., placed first in dryland winter wheat with a yield of 124.46 bushels per acre.

National winners are selected by the percentage increase their yield exceeds the most recent five-year county average determined by USDA.

National winners will be recognized during a reception at the 2019 Commodity Classic, Feb. 28-March 2 in Orlando, Fla.

Official rules for the 2019 contest will be available by Jan. 1.

Gross said future contest submissions depend on how the year goes.

"Actually, competition is heating up," he said. "There were some entries this year that were really close. I think the spirit of competition is encouraging people to try even harder. They're not far behind any more, let's put it that way."

California winery to change labels for Oregon brands

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

A Napa Valley winery at the center of a labeling dispute in Oregon has agreed to put new labels on two brands of Oregon Pinot noir, following an investigation by federal regulators.

The wines in question — Elouan and The Willametter Journal — are made by Copper Cane LLC, based in Rutherford, Calif. The winery buys grapes from roughly 50 Oregon growers to make Pinot noir and rosé in California.

Oregon winemakers earlier this year raised concerns about Copper Cane's labels, which they felt were misleading to consumers by suggesting the wines were made in one of Oregon's high-value American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs.

Federal law prohibits using an AVA name on labels, containers or bottles unless the wine was made in that state, and likewise forbids language that "tends to create a misleading perception."

Copper Cane surrendered nine labels to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, though the company was granted a "use-up" allowance, which allows it to finish selling what it has already bottled and labeled.

Tom Hogue, a spokesman for the TTB in Washington, D.C., did not comment specifically about the investigation, but said the agency determined labels for Elouan and The Willametter Journal should not have been approved in the first place.

In the case of The Willametter Journal, the label was stylized as an old tele-



George Plaven/Capital Press

A Napa Valley winery at the center of a labeling dispute in Oregon has agreed to put new labels on two brands of Oregon Pinot noir, including Elouan and The Willametter Journal.

gram, hailing the wine from the "Willamette region of Oregon's coastal range" and sourced from the "Territory of Oregon." Cases of Elouan Oregon Coast Pinot noir also referenced the Willamette, Rogue and Umpqua valleys, all three of which are federally designated AVAs.

Joe Wagner, founder and owner of Copper Cane, defended his labeling practices, saying the grapes are 100 percent from Oregon and they had hoped to communicate that fact through fun and fanciful language.

"We've never misguided consumers," Wagner said. "We're very transparent about all those elements."

Wagner said they received new labels for the brands on Nov. 19, which drops all mention to specific geographic regions. Instead, the wines will be labeled as "Grown in Oregon, Made in California."

Jim Bernau, founder and

CEO of Willamette Valley Vineyards south of Salem, Ore., has been a vocal critic of Copper Cane's labels. The laws are in place for a reason, Bernau said, and that is to protect the authenticity, value and reputation of unique wine growing areas.

Bernau said he was pleased to see the TTB take quick and serious action, though there is still work to be done.

He said two more Elouan labels are still causing problems, including Missoula Wash and Klamath's Kettle, which imply the Willamette and Rogue AVAs.

"This is a pattern of deception quite sophisticated in nature," Bernau said. "If this kind of behavior is allowed to continue, we won't have an Oregon wine industry."

The issue has also drawn the attention of Oregon legislators, including Rep. David Gombert, a Democrat representing the central coast.

Gombert — who owns an investment stake in Willamette Valley Vineyards — testified about Copper Cane's labels during a hearing Sept. 24 before the House Interim Committee on Economic Development and Trade, and issued a statement Nov. 19 after the labels were surrendered.

"This is consumer fraud, pure and simple, and I am glad the federal agency has caught it," Gombert said.

However, both Gombert and Bernau expressed disappointment about the "use-up" allowance, saying it will continue to denigrate Oregon's AVAs by allowing an estimated 900,000 more bottles to be sold into the market with the labels.

USFS takes comment on Greater Sage Grouse management amendments

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

The public in five Western states has until Jan. 3 to comment on an amended plan for managing U.S. Forest Service land to protect greater sage grouse populations.

USFS hopes the amended plan will be easier to understand and more efficient to carry out than the current version, in effect since 2015, while protecting the grouse's disturbance-sensitive sagebrush nesting habitat to the same extent. The streamlined plan will make compliance less complex for ranchers, officials said.

Proposed amendments reflect research findings in the past three years and the agency's desire to better coordinate its large, landscape-scale approach to managing habitat with the states' plans to manage the species.

The amendments are described in a draft environmental impact statement open to comments from residents of Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and Colorado.

Grazing plans under the amended version will be less complicated and "prescriptive" than what livestock operators use now, said John Shivik, USFS national sage grouse coordinator based in Ogden, Utah. They will be



Jeanne Stafford/USFWS

The U.S. Forest Service is updating its greater sage grouse plan.

broader, more site-specific and easier to understand.

"We had guidelines that were very prescriptive and didn't attack the problem of improper grazing," he said.

Proposed new guidelines, which would take effect when a grazing permit is renewed or when a problem emerges, will reflect a more comprehensive evaluation of a specific site's habitat health.

"The biggest thing is to keep the protections to sage grouse (habitat) while encouraging multiple use," said Shivik, who spoke at an open house Nov. 26 in Boise. State and federal agencies "all want to be looking in the same direction in conserving sage grouse."

Restored habitat may offset lost habitat, as the current plan allows, said Rob Mickelson, USFS Idaho sage grouse coordinator. The amended version will document invasive species — such as annual cheatgrass that competes strongly with sagebrush and other native plants — in management areas, and spell out how fire and other methods could be used to control them.

The new plan folds current Sagebrush Focal Areas into existing Priority Habitat Management Areas. Mickelson said Idaho deemed SFAs unnecessary in light of the federal priority areas and the state's own three-tiered classification system for sage grouse habitat.

Tight margins slow milk production

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

U.S. dairy farmers have taken 43,000 cows out of the national herd since February, reining in milk production growth in a fourth year of sour milk prices.

There is "certainly economic hardship at the farm level throughout the country," Matt Gould, of Dairy Market Analyst, said.

Producers he's visited with in different parts of the country feel "downtrodden and beat up" after several years of lackluster prices, he said.

"Some of these farms have struggled to be profitable" since 2014, which was a great year for milk prices, he said.

Farms have gone out of

business in the East due to economic conditions. Further west, they're going out in Ohio, Wisconsin and Minnesota because operators can't make ends meet. A number are in the process of selling out in Idaho, and the same is rumored in California. Some have already gone out of business in New Mexico, he said.

Things were setting up to be not so disappointing in 2018. But the tariff was started in June and took a lot of money out of the dairy farm economy, with estimated losses of \$1.5 billion this year, he said.

Milk production has slowed but managed to increase 0.8 percent in October year over year to 17.9 billion pounds, USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service reported on Monday.

There were 30,000 fewer

head on U.S. dairies compared with October 2017, but ever-improving production per cow tilted the scale.

Twelve of the 23 reporting states — including Wisconsin, the second largest milk-producing state — saw declines in milk production year over year. But heavy hitters California, Idaho and New York were up 3.2 percent, 2.1 percent and 1 percent, respectively.

California dairy producers reduced cow numbers by 30,000 year over year but gained 70 pounds in production per cow. Idaho farmers increased cow numbers by 7,000 and picked up 20 pounds per cow. New York saw 3,000 fewer cows but gained 30 pounds per cow.

Wisconsin held steady on per-cow production but reduced cow numbers by 4,000.

Six of the 23 states increased cow numbers, and 14 reported an increase in production per cow year over year.

Production in Texas, the fifth largest milking state, was up 7.5 percent on an additional 24,000 head and an increase of 50 pounds per cow. The state has been pushing the gas pedal all year after increasing milk production nearly 12 percent in 2017.

Part of the growth in Texas is due to new processing capacity, Gould said.

Expansions take several years to plan and were already in the pipeline in Texas, and producers don't pencil out building based on one year of economics, he said.

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