

Weather prompts depredation-related calls in E. Idaho

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

February’s heavy snows are impacting Idaho’s program that compensates farmers for crop losses caused by elk and other wildlife.

“We are definitely seeing an uptick in issues the last couple of weeks,” said Sal Palazzolo, private lands program coordinator for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Around Arco, Idaho Falls and Rexburg in eastern Idaho, “we are hearing from farmers that more and more elk are getting into haystacks and stored, tarped hay.”

IDFG’s big-game depredation program, which would expand the types of damage its compensation account covers if a bill in the Idaho Legislature passes, can face pressure from sources ranging from heavy snows to planting trends.

“This current year we have seen some specialty crops that were impacted, and they certainly are more valuable than your normal commodities,” Palazzolo said, referring to the fiscal



Alex Pajunas/EO Media Group File

Elk damaging crops is a growing problem in much of Idaho. The state legislature is considering enlarging the fund used to compensate farmers for crops that are damaged by wildlife.

year that started July 1.

Increased corn production, driven in part by the needs of Idaho dairy and cattle production, impacts the depredation program, he said. From 2017 to last year, Idaho corn production for silage was unchanged while corn production for grain increased by 23 percent,

USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service reported.

Corn, which offers easy access to food, water and security cover, “is basically perfect habitat for elk,” Palazzolo said. “Once you get elk into a pivot of corn, they can be hard to get out.”

Idaho recently has seen a couple of larger-than-usual

depredation claims related to corn, which “is pretty expensive, because elk can cause a lot of damage pretty quickly.”

Some crops are being grown where they haven’t been historically, or in higher volumes, he said. Animals are learning about these opportunities, “and we

are even starting to see animals eating potatoes, just a learned behavior.”

Palazzolo said deer and elk populations are bigger in some places now, thanks in part to relatively mild recent winters.

The annual budget for Idaho depredation prevention is about \$500,000. A separate annual budget to pay compensation claims is about \$750,000.

The compensation budget includes about \$500,000 from a hunting license fee the Legislature approved two years ago; more than \$200,000 from part of the sale of elk, deer and pronghorn antelope hunting tags; and interest. The account can build if it is not exhausted by claims each year.

The compensation account would also cover damage to irrigation gear and seedbed ground if House Bill 80 passes. The Idaho Grain Producers Association testified in favor of it. Damage claims could increase by an estimated \$150,000 per year, the bill’s fiscal note says.

“What had previously been thought was that we will put \$750,000 into that account, and historically we didn’t get that amount of claims,” Palazzolo said. “With these expensive claims coming in, that account may not build over time.”

IDFG expects claims, which in late February totaled about \$443,000 plus \$114,000 in continuing-use agreements, to be well above last year’s roughly \$700,000 by the time the fiscal year ends, he said.

In a CUA, which often lasts three years, the department pays for big-game animals’ continued use of rangeland or forage.

“We are waiting on (claims for) a couple of specialty crops,” Palazzolo said. “The ones we are waiting on are going to be some of the bigger ones — primarily corn, potatoes and more unusual specialty quinoa and specialty grains.”

IDFG pays half up front and half at the end of the fiscal year; if there is not sufficient money available, the department can prorate compensation.

Conference to focus on agritourism, ecotourism

National speakers featured at Oregon event

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

SALEM — Local experts and national leaders will speak at a conference hosted by Oregon State University Extension Service focused on developing agritourism and ecotourism.

The Agri-Eco Tourism Conference is scheduled for Thursday, March 14 from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Salem, 5090 Center St. NE Salem, Ore. Admission is \$15 per person, and includes lunch.



Stephanie Larson



Toby Bloom

“This annual conference is a place to learn from the experts and network with peers within one day,” said Mary Stewart, agriculture business development and marketing lead for OSU Extension in Marion County.

Keynote sessions will feature Toby Bloom, national program manager for tourism and interpretive services with the U.S. Forest Service in Washington, D.C., and Stephanie Larson, director of the University of California Cooperative Extension-Sonoma County.

Bloom’s presentation, titled “Strengthening Outdoor Economies in Rural Communities,” will explain how the Forest Service works with local partners to attract tourism and improve the quality of life for residents. She will also highlight financial programs and business services available to assist communities, and emerging initiatives through the USDA.

Larson will cover opportunities to enhance local agritourism, combining traditional farm, ranch and dairy operations with adventures or experiences for the public. Examples might include milking cows, making bread or U-pick fruit.

Attendees can pre-register online at Eventbrite, or contact Audrey Comerford at 503-588-5301. On-site registration will also be accepted the day of the event.

Lawmaker: Northeast Washington needs action on wolves

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — A northeast Washington legislator Friday laid out for the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee the state of ranching in wolf country.

“My folks are at the breaking point right now. I’ve got people who are not going to continue in the business,” said Rep. Joel Kretz, who figures about 90 percent of the state’s wolves are in the four counties he represents.

“We’re going to see more family ranches going by the wayside. That might not sound like a big deal to some of you in more urban areas, but it is the base economy in some of these counties,” he said. “It doesn’t just affect the rancher. It affects every small town up there.”

Before adjourning, the Democrat-

ic-controlled committee voted 11-3 to endorse Kretz’s bill directing the state Department of Fish and Wildlife to consider whether it’s time to take wolves off the state’s endangered species list in the eastern one-third of Washington.

Wolves are well established there. Wolves in the eastern one-third of Washington were removed from the federal-protected species list in 2011, while retaining protection in the western two-thirds of Washington.

House Bill 2097 wouldn’t dictate an outcome. It would require the Fish and Wildlife Commission to make a de-listing decision by June 30, 2020. Kretz called the bill “minimalistic” — nudging Fish and Wildlife Commission to make a call.

“At least this puts a light at the end of the tunnel for people who are hopeless now,” Kretz said after

the meeting.

Regardless of whether the bill passes, Fish and Wildlife will review the status of wolves and present a report to the commission in December, the department’s wolf policy coordinator, Donny Martorello, said. If the commission decides to de-list wolves, the decision would have to apply statewide, he said.

Environmental groups oppose regional de-listing.

Wolf Haven International Executive Director Diane Gallegos told the committee that Kretz’s bill would interrupt progress between environmentalists and ranchers in reducing conflicts over wolves.

“This bill will be seen as adversarial by some of the stakeholders out there,” said Gallegos, a member of the department’s Wolf Advisory Group.

The Washington Cattlemen’s

Association, Cattle Producers of Washington and Washington Farm Bureau endorsed Kretz’s bill.

Statewide, wolves are far from becoming established, but they are common and affecting life in northeast Washington, Kretz said.

“I get pictures of wolves everyday that are not in a recognized pack. They are all over the place. The thing that concerns me is we’re getting pictures in people’s backyards, and we haven’t seen so much of that before,” he said.

“I’ve been going home every year for the last few years telling folks, ‘Hang on a little bit longer. We’re making some progress in Olympia,’” he said. “If we don’t do something — even this tiny, modest approach — I don’t know that I can go back and look anybody in the eye and tell them, ‘Hang on a little bit longer.’“

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