Expert: New wireworm control a 'game-changer'

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

A new seed treatment that helps wheat growers kill wireworms was recently approved by the Environmental Protection Agency, and a Washington expert calls it a "game-changer."

Teraxxa, from BASF, uses the active ingredient Broflanilide, in a new class of chemistry, Insecticide Resistance Action Committee Mode of Action Group 30, according to a company press release.

The ingredient binds to the wireworm's central nervous system, causing hyperactivity of nerves and muscles, ultimately killing the wireworm. Field trials showed 80-90% reduction in wireworms.

Aaron Esser, Washington State University Extension agronomist, has been studying wireworms since 2008. He's tested many ways to reduce wireworm populations in the soil. He ran a five-year study with the new chemistry in Lincoln County, primarily on spring wheat.

A heavy infestation of wireworms can lead to a yield of zero, Esser said. He has seen areas that typically yield 70 bushels per acre drop to 7 to 11 bushels per acre.

Lack of a wheat crop can further lead to a severe weed population, he noted.

"It historically happens on your best ground," he said.

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

Washington State University Adams County Extension director Aaron Esser calls BASF's new product a "game-changer" for fighting wireworms.

"When you start losing your best acreage and you end up with a weed infestation instead of a wheat, that's a double-edged sword, that can hurt. They kind of sneak up on farmers."

After using the new chemical, Esser said he found only two immature wireworms in traps the following year.

Other methods averaged 14 wireworms per trap, he said.

He primarily examined the new product's effect on two species of wireworms, and hopes it will have a similar impact on other species.

"I've been doing this too long to say it solves all the problems," he said. "It may end up creating a different problem. But as far as wireworms, I think it's as close to a home run as I will see in my career."

The Washington Grain Commission pushed the state Department of Agriculture for emergency registration for the pesticide on BASF's behalf, after the process slowed down in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Any time someone would approach commission vice president Mary Palmer Sullivan with a possible wireworm treatment, she'd ask, "Will it kill them? Because that's what we need."

"This has been a long time coming," Sullivan said.

Farmers haven't had an effective treatment for wireworm since the chemical Lindane was banned for agricultural use in 2007, she said.

"The wireworm population has been building," Sullivan said. "In some years, it's been catastrophic for some growers. This last year was a great example of when conditions are right for growing good wheat, it's also good conditions for wireworm infestations to become a problem."

Fire destroys E. Washington potato processing plant

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

A Jan. 21 fire destroyed a Warden, Wash., potato processing plant and prompted the evacuation of a third of the town.

A fire was reported in the dehydrator at the Washington Potato Co. plant at 5:30 p.m., said Kyle Foreman, public information officer for the Grant County Sheriff's Office.

A representative of the parent Oregon Potato Co., in Pasco, Wash., declined to comment.

No injuries or deaths were reported, Foreman said.

"Right now, the assessment from command is it's a 100% loss," he said.

Firefighters discovered the fire had spread from the dehydrator to other parts of the building and its structure, Foreman said. They summoned more resources from throughout Grant and Adams counties.

At 8:30 p.m., there were concerns that a large anhydrous ammonia tank at the facility could explode. All resources were pulled out of the fire fight and a third of the town, which has a population of 2,800, was evacuated, Foreman said.

Sheriff's deputies and Warden police officers went door-to-door notifying residents of the evacuation, as well as using social media.

Concerns about a potential explosion subsided, and residents were allowed to return to their homes about 1:30 a.m., Foreman said. No further evacuations are anticipated.

Firefighters remained at the scene all night, pouring water onto the fire.

"People in the Warden area will probably see smoke coming from the fire until the fire extinguishes itself," Foreman said.

Grant County Sheriff's Office

Firefighters battle a blaze that destroyed a potato processing plant Jan. 21 in Warden, Wash.

The fire originated from the dehydrator, Foreman said. The cause is under investigation.

"It appears it was accidental," Foreman said.

The plant primarily makes products such as instant mashed potatoes and dehydrated scalloped potatoes for foodservice, said Chris Voigt, executive director of the Washington Potato Commission.

"We're just thankful nobody got hurt," Voigt said. "We're hoping they'll be able to be rebuild and put in its place a new state-of-the-art potato dehydration plant."

Loss of the plant will be a "huge" impact to the Warden community, and to the industry, Voigt said.

The industry sends its "off-grade" potatoes to the plant. The potatoes are still perfectly good and nutritious but have cosmetic defects or are too small or too large.

Overall demand for potato products has been down, Voigt said. Dehydrated potatoes have fared better than most other products because they are shelf-stable.

"Losing that, we don't have a market for a lot of those off-grade potatoes," Voigt said of the plant.

A similar plant in Moses Lake, Wash., is one option. Use in hash brown patties or tater tots is another, but Voigt isn't certain whether frozen potato processing companies can absorb the extra potatoes with the loss of the Warden plant.

Voigt did not have an estimate of the volume of potatoes the Warden plant processed.

"Certainly when you lose an employer in a small town like Warden, it's going to have an economic impact on the citizens and businesses," Foreman said. "Assisting and praying for Warden in their recovery is going to be paramount. We ask everyone to do that."

Pandemic fuels organic sales

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Retail sales of organic produce in the U.S. in 2020 were up 14.2% year over year, topping $8.5 billion for an increase of more than $1 billion.

Sales volume was up 16% to nearly 3 billion pounds.

Performance in the organic sector outpaced conventionally grown produce, which increased 10.7% in sales and 9% in volume, according to the Organic Produce Network and Category Partners.

The organizations attribute the increase in organic sales to the pandemic, which changed consumers' grocery shopping habits.

"The pandemic played an enormous role is surging supermarket sales, and organic fresh produce was a major contributor to that growth," Matt Seeley, CEO of the Organic Produce Network, told the Capital Press.

Lack of foodservice had more people eating at home, and consumers were looking for healthful, safe and wholesome meal options for their families, he said.

It also elevated sales of all food at supermarkets, and retail is absolutely the main driver of organic produce sales, he said.

"Foodservice to date has not been a big user of organic. It's the final horizon in terms of getting adaptation," he said.

Challenges related to supply and availability as well as price are major obstacles for organic in foodservice, he said.

Whether organic sales will decline from the current level once the pandemic is under control is the "$64,000 question," he said.

"Following a decade where sales (increases) have been at double-digit levels, in 2019 things were starting to level off some and increases were modest compared to the rest of the decade," he said.

But he said he thinks the future for organics is bright, as household penetration across the U.S. has a long way to go.

Of the top 10 organic sales and volume categories, nine had double-digit growth in 2020.

The top three sales categories in value were packaged salads at nearly $1.5 billion, berries at about $1.3 billion and apples at $620 million — each with double-digit percentage gains over the previous year.

Among the categories showing the largest year-over-year sales increases were herbs and spices, up 26%, and potatoes, up 21%. Organic grapes saw a decline of 6% in both sales and volume.

On the volume side, bananas continued to be the biggest mover and increased 16%. Volumes increased 29% for herbs and spices and 20% for berries.

All regions of the country experienced double-digit growth, with the West showing the biggest increases in sales, up 16.8%, and volume, up 17.5%.

"The continued strength of organic fruit and vegetable sales through 2020 despite pandemic-related economic challenges underscores the depth of consumer demand for organic products," Steve Lutz, senior vice president of insights and innovation at Category Partners, said in a press release.

"As we hopefully see the pandemic begin to subside into 2021, the market opportunities for fresh organic fruits and vegetables in the coming year remain outstanding," he said.

Newsom's draft budget funds sustainable ag

Governor's spending plan includes support for programs aimed at soil health, climate issues

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

Gov. Gavin Newsom has released his proposed state budget, which includes provisions for sustainable agriculture programs in California.

The proposed budget directs money to the state's Climate Smart Agriculture programs, including the Healthy Soils Program and SWEEP, the State Water Efficiency Program.

California farmers last month told the Capital Press these and other Climate Smart Agriculture programs have given them financial incentives to sequester carbon, boosting their productivity and bottom line. Farmers told the Capital Press they've used the grants to build barns, improve composting methods, seed pastures, create pollinator habitats and grow hedgerows.

Newsom's decision to continue supporting these programs came as a pleasant surprise to farmers and agricultural leaders, who were anticipating a huge cut as other priorities take center-stage during the pandemic.

Jay Watson/Alexandre Family Farm

Alexandre Family Farm has benefited from California's Alternative Manure Management Program, or AMMP, which is not funded in the governor's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year. But agricultural leaders say they are still pleased to see more funding than they expected for other sustainable agriculture programs.

"It's a really nice surprise," said Renata Brillinger, executive director of the California Climate and Agriculture Network, or CalCAN. "We didn't think there would be any funding for these programs, so this is a pretty rosy financial picture compared to what was projected."

The governor's proposed spending for the remainder of this fiscal year and the 2021 through 2022 fiscal year includes:

• $30 million for the Healthy Soils Program.

• $40 million for the SWEEP program.

• Continued funding SALC, or the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program, at its current appropriation percentage.

• $6.7 million for the UC Cooperative Extension to employ small farm advisers.

• $60 million for groundwater planning and implementation projects in critically over-drafted basins.

• $6 million to improve regulatory relief to reduce burdens on farmers.

Despite these "wins," Brillinger of CalCAN said she was disappointed that the governor did not include any funding for the popular Alternative Manure Management Program, or AMMP.

Loss of funding for this grant program will hurt farms, experts say.

Alexandre Family Farm in Crescent City, Calif., for example, has participated in the manure program multiple years.

Blake Alexandre, 58, who runs an organic dairy with his family, told the Capital Press the program has improved his animals' health, boosted his soil quality and he has seen a "huge productivity increase."

Although the governor's proposal does keep the other programs alive, the dollar amounts for some programs are smaller than in previous years.

These grant pools are shrinking at a time when, Brillinger said, the programs are growing in popularity and demand from farmers was already two or three times as high as available funds.

Brillinger said it's not yet clear why the governor cut the manure program's funding or why he budgeted fewer dollars for the other programs, but she said it may be attributable to other financial priorities during COVID-19 and reduced funding sources, such as fewer cap-and-trade dollars this year generated at auctions.

California legislators will consider the proposed budget over the next several months and finalize it by mid-to-late June.

"Legislators may or may not have a different idea than the governor about what priorities are facing the state," said Brillinger. "All of this is still subject to the whims of the legislature."

Marijuana ban near youth centers ruled unlawfully vague

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A prohibition against marijuana cultivation near "youth activity centers" in Oregon's Deschutes County is unlawfully vague, according to an appellate court decision.

The impact of the Oregon Court of Appeals ruling is limited, however, because the "youth activity center" restriction has been eclipsed by a total ban against new marijuana farms in the county.

Last summer, the state's Land Use Board of Appeals ordered the county to approve two applications to commercially grow marijuana, which had been rejected because they're within 1,000 feet of properties that offer horseback riding classes, 4-H agricultural activities and other amenities for children.

According to LUBA, the county's definition of youth activity center is so "impermissibly indefinite" that it "could encompass any swimming pool or basketball court where children play."

The county's 10-factor test for what qualifies as a youth activity center "fails to sufficiently inform interested parties of the basis on which an application may be approved or denied," contrary to Oregon law, LUBA said.

The Oregon Court of Appeals has now agreed that the "10-factor checklist analysis is not in any way signaled by the provisions of the Deschutes County Code," which must explain what's considered a youth activity center.

"The case-by-case approach as articulated by the county appears largely discretionary and standardless at this juncture, and, in all events, nothing in the provisions of the code signals the notion of a 10-factor analysis, let alone the particular 10 factors identified by the county as relevant," the appellate court ruling said.

While the Court of Appeals ruling favors Waveseer of Oregon and Tommy Nehmzow — the two marijuana applicants who challenged the youth activity center buffer — it won't benefit other aspiring marijuana producers in the county.

In last November's general election, nearly 58% of Deschutes County voters rejected a ballot initiative that would have allowed additional marijuana growing and processing sites in the county.