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SOLVING THE DRYLAND PUZZLE



George Plaven/Capital Press

Christina Hagerty, a plant pathologist at the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center, serves as one of the project leaders for the station's Resilient Dryland Farming Appropriation.

Researchers seek efficiency, want to tap into carbon credit market

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

PENDLETON, Ore. — Experimental plots of wheat unfold across the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center like a patchwork quilt of amber and gold.

Christina Hagerty, an assistant professor of cereal pathology at the station 7 miles north of Pendleton, walked through the fields on an early July morning pointing out various trials — everything from tests of new wheat varieties to new techniques for managing weeds and diseases.

Each trial could ultimately impact farmers' bottom lines. "As researchers, we need to lose our shirt before the farmer does," Hagerty said.

The purpose of the center, commonly known as CBARC, is to improve dryland farming practices in a region that receives little precipitation.

Research funded by two new congressional appropriations will help the center's scientists from Oregon State University and the USDA Agricultural Research Service unlock the secrets of dryland farming and its impacts on climate change.

One appropriation seeks to develop dryland farming techniques that can improve soil health and save farmers money by requiring less fertilizer, herbicides and other inputs.

The other is to study soil carbon sequestration and the overall carbon footprint of dryland farms in the region — critical information to determine whether growers can profit from participating in future carbon markets.

"Dryland wheat farmers are the most innovative folks you will ever meet," Hagerty said. "We need to fight for the good work our growers are doing."

The funding also marks a dramatic change of fortune for the station after years of fighting for its budgetary life.



George Plaven/Capital Press

A field of wheat at the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research and Extension Center north of Pendleton, Ore., with the Blue Mountains in the distance. The area receives more precipitation, up to 18 inches annually, compared to other areas of the Columbia Basin.

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Crop prices spur farm machinery spending

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Higher crop prices have lifted farmers' spirits in 2021, spurring a powerful appetite for new farm machinery after years of lackluster demand, experts say.

Unit sales of new tractors over 100 horsepower rose 23% during the first half of the year, while unit sales

of four-wheel drive tractors surged 32%, according to the Association of Equipment Manufacturers. Unit sales of self-propelled combines increased 11% in that time.

"Commodity prices are a pretty good indication of how farmers feel, and if they feel good, they're going to invest in capital equipment," said Curt Blades, AEM's senior vice president of ag services.

Large machinery sales plummeted during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic but recovered enough to end 2020 on a positive note.

An upswing in commodity prices, partly buoyed by foreign demand for U.S. crops, has convinced farmers to spend more readily on major purchases in 2021, Blades said.

Exciting new automation technology has also helped, as has the solid market for used machinery that's

ensured high trade-in values, he said.

"You don't invest a half-million dollars in a combine unless you feel pretty good about your future in the next few years," Blades said.

Growers are now probably seeing their strongest net returns since 2013, which also marked a high point of investment in machinery before years of weaker demand, said Michael Langemeier, a Purdue University agricultural economist who tracks the industry.

"Looking at the U.S. as a whole, 2021 is going to be better than anything from 2014 to 2019," he said.

With a better income outlook, farmers are now more willing to replace their machinery — both because some of it's wearing out, and also to reduce their tax obligations, Langemeier said.

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Bootleg Fire devastates Southern Oregon farmers, kills livestock

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

FREMONT-WINEMA NATIONAL FOREST, Ore. — The Bootleg Fire, Oregon's third-largest wildfire ever recorded, has devastated farm communities in Southern Oregon.

The fire, according to the Incident Information System, had burned more than 390,000 acres as of July 21, an area larger than Los Angeles. It has killed and maimed livestock, consumed pastures and blanketed crops with smoke.

"It's been awful," said Connie Willard, leader of Project Spirit, a nonprofit horse rescue.

The past two weeks, Willard and her volunteers have been helping small farms evacuate hundreds of animals. Willard's team has rescued cows, sheep, goats, emus, pigs, chickens, ducks and turkeys.

The Bootleg Fire has been especially hard on cattle ranchers.

"It's been horrific and devastating," said Geneva Jayne, a rancher who runs cattle with her husband and in-laws on



Courtesy of Jana Walker

Trees on fire in a pasture bordering the Sycan River.

Forest Service land near where the fire started.

The fire, Jayne said, burned her entire permit where 180 cows were grazing, killing about 15 of her cows and one bull.

"We had to euthanize several because they were so badly injured — hooves missing, udders burned," she said.

She started crying.

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