

## Research examines carbon storage potential of grass seed crops

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
Capital Press



Capital Press File

**USDA researchers are digging into the carbon budget of grass seed crops grown in the Willamette Valley, with farms standing to benefit from healthier soils and potential revenue from emissions trading.**

FOREST GROVE, Ore. — New USDA research is digging into the carbon storage capacity of grass seed crops grown in the Willamette Valley that could benefit farms by providing healthier soils and potential revenue from emissions trading programs such as cap and trade.

Kristin Trippe, a microbiologist at the Agricultural Research Service in Corvallis, shared the results of a study examining carbon stocks in 24 fields growing tall fescue.

While carbon measurements between fields did vary, the average total was 76 tons per acre going to a depth of 40 inches, Trippe told grass seed producers at Oregon State University's winter seed and cereal crop production meeting Jan. 6 in Forest Grove.

That was higher compared to soil samples collected from fields growing annually tilled crops.

Whether grass straw was baled or left in the field made little difference in the overall amount of soil carbon, Trippe said.

"Even though it's thousands of pounds per acre, it's not enough to compete with this incredible pool of deeper soil carbon," she said.

Interest in gauging soil carbon has been on the rise in recent years as a means to combat climate change and trap harmful greenhouse gases.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown signed an executive order in 2020 requiring state agencies to adopt policies that will cut greenhouse gas emissions at least 80% below 1990 levels by 2050.

In response, the Oregon Global Warming Commission developed a state-wide natural and working lands proposal last year that calls for increasing carbon sequestration by 5 million metric tons of carbon dioxide per year by 2030, and 9 million metric tons per year by 2050, in order to meet those climate objectives.

Planting grass is one of the fastest proven ways to increase soil carbon, Trippe said, since it provides continuous soil cover, allows farmers to till their fields less and returns carbon-rich residue to the ground.

"It makes sense that planting grasses increases carbon," Trippe said.

Oregon ranks No. 1 in the country in production of several grass seed varieties, including orchardgrass, fescue, ryegrass and red and white clover.

For her project analyzing carbon stocks in grass

seed systems, Trippe said she received funding from the Oregon Seed Council. Researchers collected 216 soil samples during the spring, ranging in depth from zero to 40 inches.

Trippe said they chose tall fescue because it represents a large percentage of production in the Willamette Valley — roughly 154,000 acres — with root systems reaching 16 inches deep and stands typically kept for 4-7 years.

Earlier studies had produced mixed results whether baling straw made an impact on the amount of soil organic matter in grass seed fields. Organic matter makes up about 3% of soil, and carbon makes up about 58%.

The project's findings found that carbon stocks were marginally higher in fields where straw was left on the ground, versus baled.

In older, more established fescue fields, the total was 84.5 tons of carbon when straw was left on the ground, and 72.6 tons per acre when baled. In younger fields, the totals were 70.5 tons of carbon per acre when straw was left on the ground, and 69.8 tons per acre when baled.

"I would caution the numbers are incredibly variable," Trippe said. "It's very difficult to aggregate the data, and it's very difficult to know what's happening."

Trippe said their work is far from done. In the future, she hopes to receive funding for more long-term studies at several locations, and work with growers to better understand which management practices result in the most carbon stored.

Those numbers are necessary for grass seed growers to participate in carbon markets and inform regulatory policies, Trippe said.

"You're working toward that (carbon) potential," she said. "I think we can do a little better."

# Idaho farm cash receipts reach record high \$8.9B

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho's estimated farm cash receipts for 2021 were up 9% to a record-high \$8.9 billion.

Higher prices for livestock and many crops drove the increases. The previous record was \$8.8 billion in 2014.

"In Idaho, ag is a growth industry," University of Idaho agricultural economist Garth Taylor told the state Legislature's Economic Outlook Committee Jan. 6.

A pro-agriculture Legislature enables the sector to grow faster in Idaho than many states, he said.

Taylor said a big livestock sector and diverse commodity mix that includes high-volume and high-value crops help agriculture grow in Idaho. The state ranks fifth



**Garth Taylor**

in percentage of gross domestic product derived from ag. It is also third nationally in milk production.

Net farm income adjusted for inflation grew by 150% in Idaho and 20% nationally between 1997 and 2020, he said.

Farm gross domestic product grew 200% in Idaho and 60% nationally. Both are helped by the dairy industry's consistent expansion and increased efficiency.

Idaho's dairy herd and milk output continue to grow to the extent that "we need a new Chobani every two to three years" in equivalent processing capacity, Taylor said. Chobani operates a big

Greek yogurt plant in Twin Falls.

Idaho livestock revenue is 6% higher than 2020 and 9% above the 10-year average, according to UI's annual Financial Condition of Idaho Agriculture report, which he presented to the committee.

Cash receipts were up 13% from the previous year for cattle and calves to about \$1.8 billion and up 3% for milk to \$3.06 billion.

However, the estimated net farm income in the state dropped 8% from 2020 to 2021 because of higher expenses for fertilizer and other inputs.

Crop revenues, at an expected \$3.8 billion in 2021, are up 14% from 2020 and 17% above the 10-year average, the report said.

Year-to-year gains included 21% for hay, 19%

for sugar beets and 8% for potatoes. Barley and wheat receipts rose 3%.

Federal government payments to Idaho producers in fiscal 2021 were estimated at \$488 million, down 41%.

However, they were 107% above the 10-year average. Idaho is estimated to have received 0.7% of total 2021 payments to U.S. agriculture.

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program payments were an estimated \$337 million in Idaho in 2021, 69% of total federal payments. Disaster program payments were \$26 million, the highest in a decade.

Taylor said that while agriculture is more volatile than the overall economy, it's a steadier employer as production and processing continue regardless of a commodity's price on a given day.

## Washington lawmaker files 'seasonal' farmworker pay bill

By **DON JENKINS**  
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The top-ranking Republican on the House Labor and Workplace Standards Committee has introduced a bill to add a seasonal clause to Washington's new overtime law for farmworkers.

House Bill 1750 would allow farms to choose 12 weeks a year during which the threshold for time-and-a-half would be 50 hours a week rather than 40 hours.

The bill would amend legislation passed in 2021. Democrats, who control the House, last year rejected raising the overtime threshold during peak harvests.

Rep. Larry Hoff of Vancouver has attracted nine co-sponsors, including two Democrats.

"It certainly helps," Hoff said. "I'm excited these Democrats see it's the right thing to do."

The Washington Supreme Court thrust the issue onto lawmakers by a 5-4 ruling in 2020 that granted time-and-a-half pay after 40 hours in a week to dairy workers.

In response, legislators voted to gradually extend the same overtime pay to all farmworkers.

Beginning this year, the threshold will be 55 hours. In 2023, the threshold will be 48 hours. In 2024, the threshold will be 40 hours.

Farm groups were pleased that majority Democrats phased in overtime. Lawmakers also voted to shield dairies from back-pay lawsuits.

Hoff said adding a seasonal clause to the bill last year "was too big of a bite."

Under his bill, farms would be asked to make a "good-faith estimate" of which 12 weeks the threshold would be raised to 50 hours a week at least 30 days in advance.

Farm and labor groups clashed over a seasonality exemption last year. Labor groups said overtime pay will prevent workers from being exploited.

Overtime pay is meant to promote worker health and spread out work to more employees, according to the Washington Minimum Wage and Hour Act.



Washington House Republicans

**Washington state Rep. Larry Hoff, R-Vancouver, has proposed a seasonal exemption to the state's agricultural overtime law.**

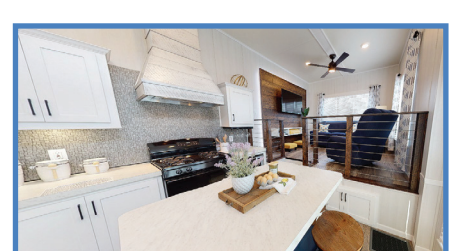
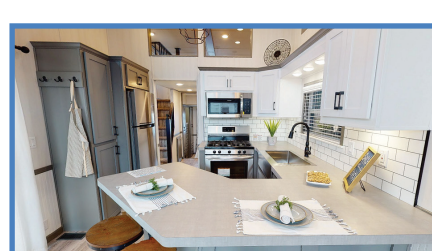
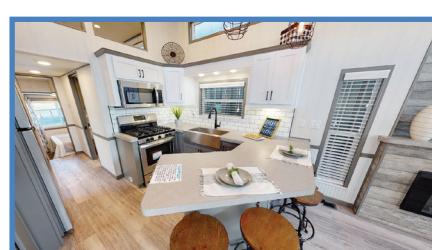
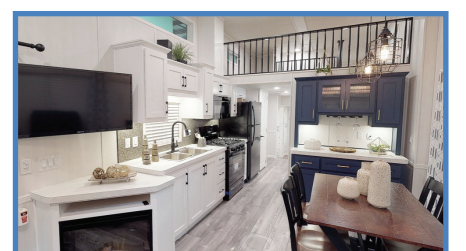
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