Sheep ranchers use light control for year-round lambing

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Sheep head to the barn for feeding time.

The sheep industry is highly seasonal, making it difficult for farmers to market fresh sheep products such as lamb meat and milk year-round.

According to the American Lamb Resource Center, most sheep are at peak fertility for breeding September through December, and as a result, 80% of the U.S. lamb crop is born in the first five months of the calendar year. This seasonality, according to the center, can cause "inefficiencies and market volatility."

New research, however, is enabling producers to breed sheep successfully out of season using a method called light extension protocol, or "photoperiod protocol." The idea is similar to using artificial light to stimulate egg production by chickens.

The practice of using photoperiod protocol has been common in Quebec, Canada, since 2001 with high rates of effectiveness across all breeds and crosses, but the strategy remains mostly untapped by U.S. producers.

Farmers who have learned to use light extension protocols are able to run separate groups of sheep, bred at different times, so lambs are born in batches through the year.

"It can be really profitable for you to supply milk all year round," said Johanne Cameron, Canadian sheep farmer and former sheep extension coordinator for the province of Quebec.

Cameron was speaking at the Dairy Sheep Association of North America's symposium.

Cameron's research has primarily been in meat breeds.

The benefits of using light control to improve off-season breeding are immense, said Cameron. According to data from more than 150 farms from 2003 to 2010, fertility rates under the protocols are 89% to 90% for females. Light-treated rams also become better breeders, and photoperiod protocols are associated with increased litter size across all breeds.

More importantly, farmers who have a year-round supply of fresh meat or milk can access markets — often with higher prices — than those tied to the seasonal patterns.

Under a photoperiod plan, farmers use artificial light exposure to signal to sheep what is a "long day" — usually 16 to 20 hours of light — versus a "short day" — generally 8 to 12 hours of light.

The "long day" treatment must come first and last a minimum of three months. During this time — typically between October to February — the farmer exposes the sheep to 16 or more hours of light per day, which synchronizes the females' reproductive systems.

The long day treatment must immediately be followed by a "short day" treatment, also lasting at least three months, during which the farmer exposes the sheep to less daily light.

The ideal gap between short and long days is 8 hours, but 6 hours is minimum. In other words, if a farmer exposed sheep to 12 hours of light during short days, the farmer should ideally expose the sheep to 20 hours of light during the long days.

For the protocol to work, sheep must be able to rest in total darkness during the night.

The technique can result in lambings every 40 to 60 days.

The protocols can be adapted to fit either animals living in a closed barn or those with access to the outdoors and daily exposure to natural light.

The technique can also be adapted for other small ruminants.

Cameron estimated photoperiod protocols cost about $2 to $3 per head per year.

If the protocols are applied incorrectly, however, sheep can experience a drop in fertility, body condition score and milk production. For that reason, Cameron advises farmers to do thorough research before starting a program.

Army Corps considers alternatives for operating Willamette Basin dams

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

George Plaven/Capital Press File

Detroit Dam is one of 13 dams operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Willamette River Basin.

PORTLAND — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is re-evaluating how it will maintain and operate 13 dams in Oregon's Willamette Valley to protect three species of endangered fish.

The dams, collectively known as the Willamette Valley Project, were built more than 50 years ago to provide flood control from heavy spring rains. Other authorized purposes include irrigation, hydropower, recreation and fish and wildlife habitat.

Officials at the Corps' Portland District outlined seven alternatives for project operations during a virtual public meeting on Jan. 19. The changes described in each alternative are intended to improve water quality, temperature and fish passage at the dams for spring chinook, winter steelhead and bull trout.

A federal judge in 2020 ruled the dams had pushed endangered Upper Willamette salmon and steelhead runs to the brink of extinction, while the Corps lagged years behind making scheduled upgrades that were agreed to in an earlier court settlement with environmental groups.

The Corps is now updating its Environmental Impact Statement, or EIS, for the Willamette Project, walking the tightrope between the needs of fish and the needs of other users.

"It is a delicate dance that has increasingly become more complex," said Erik Petersen, operations project manager for the Corps. "Everyone is giving something up, and everyone is gaining something. No one is getting anything exactly the way they want it."

Public scoping for the updated EIS began in 2019. The Corps received 717 suggestions for measures that could be implemented at one of the dams. From there, the list was whittled down to 23 measures based on their feasibility and benefits.

The measures are divided into four sub-categories — fish passage, water quality, flow and "common to all," which includes hatchery improvements and gravel augmentation.

The Corps mixes and matches these measures into each of the seven alternatives, looking to strike the right balance of actions to maximize the dams' benefits.

For example, alternatives 3A and 3B focus on boosting fish passage by modifying operations, rather than substantially changing any of the structures. That would involve deep spring and fall season reservoir drawdowns, boosting river flows at a time when adult and juvenile salmon are migrating.

Alternative 4, on the other hand, takes a more building-based approach, adding new downstream passage and water quality facilities to keep fish healthy and moving.

Kelly Wingard, project manager, said the Corps is still assessing the impact of alternatives. The agency will release its draft EIS sometime in the fall, which will include a preferred alternative. A final EIS and Record of Decision could be finished by 2024.

The last time an EIS was done for the Willamette Project was in 1980, Wingard said. Since then, the project's demands have changed substantially.

"Really, we're re-looking at how we balance the different priorities for the system," Wingard said.

Last year, irrigators gained access to 328,000 acre-feet of water stored in the project's reservoirs, part of a reallocation plan that divvied 1.6 million acre-feet of water among farmers, cities and fish and wildlife.

But Kathy Warner, a technical expert and water supply specialist for the Willamette Project EIS, said changes in dam operations could mean changes in timing and availability of water for irrigation. Agriculture, she said, is part of Corps' analysis of the alternatives.

"Each of these alternatives could have a different level of impact, or effect," Warner said. "They're looking at the different ways the system could operate."

Washington Supreme Court lets stand $18M fine against food makers

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Washington Supreme Court

OLYMPIA — The Washington Supreme Court has upheld a record $18 million fine against a food industry trade group for campaign finance reporting violations committed in 2013.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association, now called the Consumer Brands Association, was fined for not reporting the names of its members that contributed $11 million toward defeating a GMO-labeling initiative.

In a 5-4 ruling, the majority on Jan. 20 rejected claims that the penalty was unconstitutionally excessive. The court said the fine could be based on the amount the association concealed from disclosure.

Dissenting justices said the trade group was guilty of reporting violations and that the amount of money involved was irrelevant.

In a statement, Consumer Brands said it will will pursue all legal options, including petitioning the U.S. Supreme Court.

"The state's legal process has been tainted by partisan politics, and the ruling in this case will chill core political speech by legitimate organizations based on their viewpoints," said Stacy Papadopoulos, general counsel and senior vice president of operations and initiatives.

Attorney General Bob Ferguson said the ruling was a "complete and total victory for Washington state."

"More importantly, this is a victory for fair and transparent elections in Washington, and a defeat of special interest dark money," he said on Twitter.

The fine is by far the largest ever in the U.S. for campaign finance violations, topping the $3.8 million levied by the Federal Elections Commission against the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp. in 2006.

The case drew interest from business organizations, including the Washington Farm Bureau, which said in an amicus brief that the unprecedented penalty would chill political speech by trade groups.

In a previous ruling, the state Supreme Court had upheld the association's conviction. The trade group reported itself as the source of campaign funds, but did not initially list individual companies. The trade group had hoped to shield its members from threats and boycotts by anti-GMO activists.

At issue Thursday was whether the $18 million fine violated the Eighth Amendment's prohibition on excessive punishments.

The association argued that at most it should be fined $622,800, a calculation based on the number of incomplete and late reports.

Writing for the majority, Justice Steven Gonzalez said the Thurston County judge who imposed the $18 million fine was justified in looking beyond the number of reporting violations, including the amount of money involved.

"The (association's) offense struck at the core of open elections," Gonzalez wrote. Justices Susan Owens, Mary Yu, Raquel Montoya-Lewis and G. Helen Whitener signed the opinion.

Judge refuses to dismiss lawsuit over cherry patent infringement

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A federal judge has refused to dismiss the Canadian government's lawsuit against several Washington farms that it alleges infringed on a cherry tree plant patent.

The farming operations — Van Well Nursery, Monson Fruit Co., and Gordon and Sally Goodwin — haven't proved the Canadian government's patent for Staccato cherries is invalid, according to Chief U.S. District Judge Stanley Bastian in Spokane, Wash.

The cherry cultivar is considered to provide a market advantage to farmers because it matures after other common varieties in late summer.

There are still too many factual uncertainties over the plant patent for the case to be decided as a matter of law, which is known as summary judgment, the judge said. "In this case, the court finds that genuine disputes of material fact preclude summary judgment on the issue of patent invalidity."

In 2020, the Canadian Minister of Agriculture and Agri-food filed a lawsuit against the defendants, claiming that Van Well Nursery had transferred Staccato cherry trees to Gordon Goodwin contrary to a license with its agricultural research and development center in British Columbia.

The complaint alleged that Goodwin patented a new cultivar called Glory that's genetically indistinguishable from Staccato, which was delivered to Monson Fruit for the propagation of "hundreds of acres" of trees.

Goodwin has said that Glory trees are distinct from the Staccato variety, and the defendants have argued in court that the Canadian government's patent is invalid and unenforceable, justifying a dismissal of the lawsuit.

Specifically, the farms argue that under the law at the time, the Canadian government disqualified the Staccato trees from a plant patent because it had been offered for commercial sale more than a year before the patent application.

The defendants claim the patent would have been denied if the Canadian government hadn't "withheld critical information" from U.S. authorities about testing agreements for the trees, the judge said.

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