

Weber Family Farms: Generations of growing alfalfa seed

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

PARMA, Idaho — Weber Family Farms has been growing alfalfa seed for several generations. Craig Weber's father and grandfather started growing seed in the mid-1960s, as did many other farms in the region.

The Weber farm near Parma, Idaho, also grows peppers and wheat, but the main crop is still alfalfa seed. There is always demand for seed, since a lot of alfalfa hay is produced around the country, with many varieties.

"Some varieties work well in mountainous areas like Idaho, and some work best in different climates and elevations," Craig said.

"When I was growing up, all the farms in this valley grew alfalfa seed. Today, there are only four growers left. Alfalfa seed crops take a lot of time and effort," he said.

"This is a non-GMO area, here at Parma. It's been designated that way ever since GMO crops became available. Farmers here decided to create this GMO-free zone; we figured that if the whole world wants GMO we could change over later," Craig said. "GMOs haven't really boomed; they've had a lot of bad press. That's been good for us and our area."

Alfalfa seed crops depend on bees for pollination.

"Regular honey bees don't like to pollinate alfalfa" because of the shape of the flower, he said. The bee needs to "trip" the flower open.

"We need leafcutter bees, to



Craig Weber and his family. From left are Garrett, Courtney, Evan, Maria, Craig, Samantha Ashby and son-in-law Zach Ashby.

trip the flower, and it's a challenge keeping them going," Craig said. "If we didn't have these bees, we wouldn't have a seed crop."

Some of the pesticides traditionally used on crops to deter insects that damage the plants are harmful to bees as well.

"In the old days people used chemicals that eradicated everything — sometimes spraying every few days to keep the bugs at bay. Now we've learned this isn't healthy; the chemicals available

today are more specific regarding the bugs they target," Craig said.

The newer chemicals are geared toward the way certain insects eat, destroying their mouthpieces. There are beneficial insects that farmers don't want to kill, such as ladybugs (that prey on harmful insects) and bees.

"Sprays today are gentler on bees. Our population return of bees for the next year is higher now, though we also buy some Canadian bees to make sure we have

enough," he said.

Canada doesn't have as many bee diseases as Idaho, Washington and Oregon, and those bees are able to reproduce at a higher rate.

"People today are trying to raise healthy bees and keep everything healthy, so we won't need the expense of buying Canadian bees. If we can keep our own bees healthy and reproducing, we are better off," he said.

The alfalfa seed is marketed to several companies through con-

tracts, for specific varieties.

"We also raise common varieties that we grow on our own to sell. Some are traditional varieties that the old ranchers and cowboys in the Northwest prefer because they do well and have stood the test of time," he explained.

When a new stand is planted, it stays in two to three years, sometimes longer on their own varieties.

"It depends on how our rotation is for our other crops. Sometimes it's nice to leave the alfalfa in a little longer to help the ground rebuild. When we take out a stand, all of that old crop gets chopped up and goes back into the ground," said Craig.

This helps the soil fertility for other crops in the rotation.

"We've also done some trading with neighbors. We have traded ground and grown alfalfa seed on their farms while they've grown sugar beets on our place," he said.

Certain weeds can get started in alfalfa, and when that ground is put into sugar beets those weeds can be cleaned up, he said.

This is a family operation. "My brother Alan and his son Trent also farm with me. My wife and I have four children but our 17-year-old son is the only one still at home. I am not sure yet whether any of them will be interested in farming; they are still figuring out what they want to do. They are involved in the farm, however, and come out and help, but we are letting them make that decision on their own," Craig said. "There is room for them if they want to come back."



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