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FOR THE BIRDS

Growers raise sunflowers for birdseed



Dennis Urbat

A field of sunflowers, raised by Dennis Urbat in the Clayton, Wash., area for birdseed. Urbat was the first farmer in the area to try growing sunflowers as a rotation crop.

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

CLAYTON, Wash. — Pristine white snow shimmered in the sunlight on Dennis Urbat's field the morning of March 1, but come summer it will be awash in a golden wave of sunflowers whose seeds are bound for a feathered clientele.

Urbat primarily raises the striking yellow flowers for their seeds, which are used in bird feeders around the world.

He doesn't grow the flowers solely because of a love for birds. During last year's drought, sunflowers were his only crop that was profitable, Urbat said.

Urbat farms with his son, Blaine, 20 miles north of Spokane. He also raises alfalfa, timothy, oats, hard red wheat, soft white wheat and canola.

He typically plants sunflowers the last week of April or first week of May, and then harvests them in late September or early October. They can reach a height of 6 feet.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Blaine Urbat and his father, Dennis, stand in the snow with their dog Remy in a field March 1 in Clayton, Wash. Come summer, the field will be filled with sunflowers raised for birdseed.

Urbat started raising sunflowers about nine years ago. He was the first farmer in the area to raise them as a rotational crop.

"Everyone else was kind of onlookers and seeing if I would be

successful with it," he said.

A friend in North Dakota was raising sunflowers for birdseed, so Urbat decided to plant 40 acres of the crop to see how it would grow.

He got about 2,600 pounds per

acre, which penciled out to \$600 per acre. He estimates the cost of production is about \$100 per acre.

"It was quite profitable," he said.

The following year, Urbat increased his acreage to 120 acres.

Since then, he has grown 250 to 1,000 acres of sunflowers each year on his land and for neighbors.

Sunflowers for birdseed make up about 20% of his total operation, he said.

"It's an amazing plant, how it survives in drought-tolerant conditions," he said. "It actually surprised us."

More people feeding birds

The company Urbat grows sunflowers for, Global Harvest Foods, is the No. 1 wild bird food manufacturer in the world.

"If the average tube-style bird feeder holds one pound, we sold enough bird food to fill 500 million feeders" last year, said Judy Hoy-sak, vice president of product development and marketing.

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Drought conditions persist for Pacific Northwest

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

Nearly three-quarters of the Pacific Northwest remains locked in drought, climate experts from Oregon, Washington and Idaho say.

In the driest areas of southern and central Oregon, irrigators face another year of water shortages, and fire districts are predicting above-normal risk for wildfires as early as May.

Britt Parker, regional drought information coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said 74% of the Northwest is currently in drought. Approximately 18% is in "extreme" or "exceptional" drought, the two driest categories.

"This reflects long-term precipitation

deficits for much of the interior Northwest," Parker said.

It would take 150-200% above normal precipitation over the next two months to end drought conditions in the most severely impacted areas, according to NOAA. Nick Bond, Washington state climatologist, said the odds of that happening are extremely low.

Bond said the region was expected to benefit from La Nina, which typically portends cooler and wetter weather during the winter.

However, a ridge of high pressure that normally parks itself over the north-central Pacific Ocean was instead closer to the West Coast, deflecting storms and pushing them north.

"That basically dried us out for that period of January and February that we're

complaining about," Bond said.

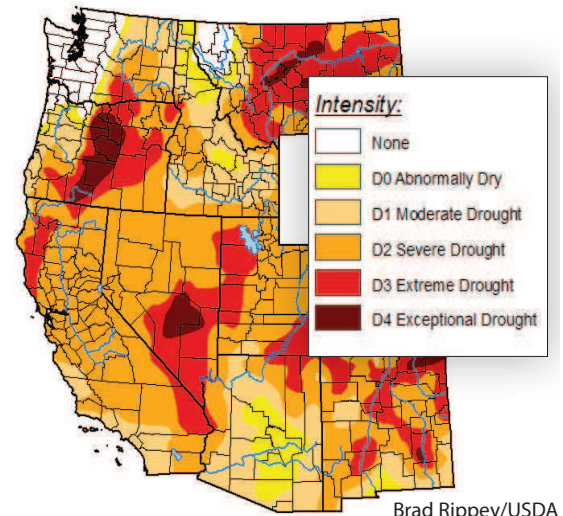
Even with the recent atmospheric river that brought heavy rainfall to northwest Oregon and Washington, precipitation did not fall where it was needed most, farther south and east.

Looking ahead, Bond said more of the same can be expected from March through May.

"For Central Oregon and Southern Idaho, the forecasts are not nearly as encouraging," he said, adding that Mother Nature "is not always fair."

Bond did highlight one silver lining: There is no indication this spring will be as warm as it was in 2021. Cooler weather means mountain snowpack is liable to stick

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Brad Rippey/USDA

Western Drought Monitor

Potential county hemp restrictions raise concerns about industry



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

Hemp is harvested from an Oregon field. A bill that permits counties to suspend new hemp production has raised concerns about farmers missing economic opportunities.

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

Oregon counties may suspend new hemp production under a bill recently passed by the Legislature, raising concerns in the industry about farmers missing economic opportunities.

Under Senate Bill 1564, which now awaits the signature of Gov. Kate Brown, county governments can declare an emergency to stop the issuance of new state hemp licenses for two years.

Hemp production in Oregon has already fallen precipitously due to an oversupply, but county restrictions could hinder an industry resurgence at a time when new uses for the crop are multiplying, experts say.

"The negative impact is it sends a message to the rest of the country that Oregon is not where you want to do hemp," said Beau Whitney, an economist who tracks the industry. "It puts the state farther and farther behind."

Excitement about the high demand and healthful effects of cannabidiol, or CBD, caused a surge in hemp production that was soon followed by a surplus, prompting many farmers to abandon or reduce cultivation of the crop.

Acreage across the U.S. dropped by more than 50% last year, while Oregon's acreage plummeted more than 80%, according to Whitney.

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