

Cover crop seed demand rises; competitors squeeze supply

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SCIO, Ore. — Fierce competition for acreage in Oregon's Willamette Valley is limiting the supply of cover crop seed just as demand is increasing.

Seed growers haven't planted as many acres of cover crops, including clover and radish, due to expectations of higher returns for wheat and grass seed, said Jerry Hall, president of GO Seed in Salem, Ore.

"A lot of the shortage is market-driven," he said.

Clover and other legumes fix nitrogen, helping farmers reduce fertilizer expenses, while cover crops generally improve soil health, potentially decreasing the need for other farm inputs as well, experts say.

Meanwhile, the USDA aims to double cover crop plantings by corn and soybean farmers to 30 million acres in less than a decade to reduce erosion and sequester carbon.

"Where's the seed going to come from?" wonders Gary Weaver, owner of Weaver Seed of Oregon near

Scio, Ore. "We won't have a problem producing it if the price is right."

Because cover crops are typically planted for agronomic reasons rather than to generate revenue, prices for seed must remain cost-effective for farmers.

That constraint can pose an economic dilemma for the cover crop industry, since seed producers often need a financial incentive to expand their acreage.

"How do we keep that seed affordable for the farmer on the other side?" Hall asked. "It's a balancing act to keep it affordable."

In Oregon's Willamette Valley, a popular seed production area, the acreage of cover crops grown for seed has plunged about 50% since last year due to competition, Weaver said.

"There's going to be shortages for the next few years as long as this wheat price stays up," Weaver said. "You can't blame the farmers."

In light of soaring prices for competing commodities, as well as fuel and fertilizer, the outlook for cover crop seeds is tough to predict, he said.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press
Chad Weaver, left, and Gary Weaver examine a field of kale grown for seed at their company, Weaver Seed of Oregon near Scio, Ore.

"We don't know where it's going," Weaver said.

Based on the drop in Oregon's acreage, a seed shortage is likely looming in the near term, he said.

At the same time, the popularity of cover crops is taking off, Weaver said. One of the company's seed dealers expects sales to climb 20% this year.

"The innovators have done their job," Weaver said. "The neighbors are looking over the fence."

any particular producers, but site-appropriate seed is key in helping cover crops succeed, he said.

One possible solution would be a national cover crop testing program to examine how different varieties perform across agricultural regions, Hall said. "We need to get more information to the farmer."

Competition from other crops isn't the only factor affecting the seed supply.

Production is also dependent on specialized seed-cleaning equipment for cover crops, he said. "It's more than just replacing the screens."

Historically, seed producers have often been reluctant to make the additional investments, Hall said.

"Apparently, we're not as good at hyping cover crops as we are hemp," he joked.

Seed producers also benefit agronomically from growing cover crop seed, since they can suppress weeds, Hall said. Less herbicide spraying and soil tillage means fewer passes over the field, cutting fuel usage as well.

"If we add to the rotation, instead of doing grass after

grass after grass, we're going to clean up those fields," he said.

While legumes fix nitrogen, cover crops like radish can alleviate fertilizer expenses by "scavenging" nutrients that would otherwise leach into the ground, said Chad Weaver, general manager of Weaver Seed.

As the plant decays, those nutrients then become available for the next season's crop, he said. "You're going to buy less commercial fertilizer."

In areas with scarce water or declining aquifers, cover crops help retain moisture by reducing runoff and increasing absorption, Chad Weaver said. Evaporation is also decreased compared to bare ground.

"The sun's not beating down on the soil," he said. "It keeps it cooler."

Boosting beneficial insects and microbes while fully reaping other rewards typically takes about three to five years of planting cover crops, Chad Weaver said.

"You're basically building the project," he said. "It's got to be consecutive years and sticking to that program."

OCEAN SHIPPING REFORM ACT OF 2022



Getty Images

Congress passed the Ocean Shipping Reform Act of 2022 on Monday.

Congress passes ocean shipping reform bill

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Congress on Monday passed the Ocean Shipping Reform Act of 2022, a bill that aims to ease longstanding supply chain problems and port disruptions.

The House passed the bill, 369-42. The bill had already passed the Senate in late March.

President Biden was expected to sign the bill into law on Thursday. The White House recently released a video featuring Biden talking with retail CEOs and calling on the House to pass the bill.

The legislation will broaden the powers of the Federal Maritime Commission, giving it authority to investigate late fees charged by carriers and prohibit ocean carriers and marine terminals from refusing to fill available cargo space.

Agricultural industry leaders say the act will

empower the Federal Maritime Commission to crack down on excessive fees charged by carriers and ensure ranchers and farmers are treated fairly.

More than 90 agricultural and business organizations on June 10 had signed a letter urging Congress to pass the bill and Biden to sign it into law, and the bill's passage on June 13 was widely applauded.

"Today's actions couldn't have come at a more needed time for the United States and the world as changes from the Ocean Shipping Reform Act will enable more U.S. agricultural products to reach the global marketplace," Ted McKinney, CEO of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, said in a statement.

The measure, McKinney said, will help maintain "fair ocean carrier practices" and lessen undue burdens on the food system.

"I was pleased to team up with President Biden to urge passage and look forward to him quickly signing the Ocean Shipping Reform Act into law so farmers and ranchers can continue to meet the needs of families in America and overseas," American Farm Bureau Federation President Zippy Duvall said in a statement.

The Agriculture Transportation Coalition, a group representing agriculture exporters in U.S. transportation policy, called the bill's passage "great news" and a "big step forward."

The measure was sponsored by Sens. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and John Thune, R-S.D., and Reps. John Garamendi, D-Calif., and Dusty Johnson, R-S.D.

Experts say the legislation will be the largest overhaul of shipping regulations since 1998.

Minnesota farmer takes over U.S. Wheat leadership role

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Rhonda Larson started farming "as soon as I could reach the pedals," she said with a laugh.

An East Grand Forks, Minn., wheat farmer, Larson recently took over as chairperson of the U.S. Wheat Associates board of directors. She will serve a one-year term.

She replaces Grass Valley, Ore., farmer Darren Padgett, who served an extended, two-year term due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Padgett is now past chairman.

U.S. Wheat is the overseas marketing arm for the industry. Larson said she wants to ensure wheat remains profitable for farmers.

"I'd like to keep wheat as a good, viable crop for farmers," she told the Capital Press. "Yes, the price is there right now, and we can make some money, but we all know it ebbs and flows. When it goes down, people can't afford to plant it."

Larson called for better wheat quality, noting farmers are subject to discounts for sprout damage, low falling number tests, test weight and protein level.

"All of that affects your bottom line," she said. "You might go in there and think you're going to get, now,

maybe \$11 a bushel, and you may come out with \$5. It just depends on the quality of your wheat."

In Larson's area, farmers raise a lot of sugar beets, with wheat acreage in direct alignment, she said.

"Wheat is wonderful for the ground, and it makes great ground for other crops," she said. "So you want to plant it, but ... it has to be economically feasible that it's going to be worth it."

Larson wants to keep wheat "on the forefront" for the public.

"I think a lot of people don't understand that food comes from ... the ground, and farmers raise it," she said.

"I think the pandemic has put a little more emphasis on food and where it comes from, but I still think there's a disconnect between the grocery store and the farmer. I think a lot of people think your food comes from the grocery store, and not from us."

She also wants to emphasize that farmers are stewards of the land.

"The ground is our biggest asset, so we are very, very concerned about taking care of (it) and making sure it's there for the next generation to farm," she said.

Larson raises wheat, soybeans and sugar beets on

her father's 3,000-acre farm with her brothers and her son, 38.

Larson said she loves the smell of the dirt as she farms.

"I love sitting up on top of the grain drill and filling it, it's sunset and it's beautiful and it's still," she said. "And then your neighbors — farm people are different. You've got neighbors who will come running whenever you need them."

Larson was encouraged by former U.S. Wheat senior adviser Jim Frahm to go through the leadership positions at the organization as she ended a term on the board representing Minnesota farmers.

"He said it was his last meeting because he was retiring, and I said, 'Well this is my last meeting, too, because I'm going to go off the board, too,'" she recalled. "And he said, 'No you're not, you should go through the chairs.' And I thought, 'Well, maybe I should.'"

At the end of her term, Larson most hopes to have kept wheat on the radar for farmers.

"It has to be economically feasible to plant," she said.

Larson began her term during the U.S. Wheat meeting June 8 in Bend, Ore. Michael Peters of Okarche, Okla., is vice chairman. Clark Hamilton of Ririe, Idaho, is secretary-treasurer.

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