

Wet spring brings pros, cons to grass seed harvest

By **GEORGE PAVEN**
Capital Press

A wetter-than-usual spring in Oregon's Willamette Valley is proving to be a mixed bag for farmers growing the region's signature grass seed crops.

Harvest is underway in the region dubbed the "grass seed capital of the world," with most fields swathed and combines slowly moving from field to field.

Roger Beyer, executive director of the Oregon Seed Council, said this year's growing season was a far cry from 2021, when extreme heat and drought took a significant toll on farms. Instead, the region was drenched by steady rain that lasted from April into early and mid-June.

"Certainly, the weather conditions were much more favorable than last year," Beyer said. "I'm expecting closer to an average crop."

However, that doesn't appear to be the case everywhere and for all varieties of grass. Some farmers



George Paven/Capital Press File

Grass seed is harvested in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

say they are experiencing low yields because of all that moisture.

Beyer said the issue stems from bouts of prolonged rain overlapping with the period when grasses typically pollinate, making it harder for the plants to release their pollen into the air. Lower pollination rates mean less seed come harvest.

Heavy rain can also cause lodging, when the crop falls over and disrupts pollination.

"What I'm hearing now is (the effects) are very localized," Beyer

said. "When it's raining constantly, it's hard for that pollen to flow."

Oregon grows approximately 400,000 acres of grass seed, with about 85% produced in the Willamette Valley. Beyer said the state produces 60% of the world's cool-season grass seed, which is exported to more than 60 countries and used in turf, forage and cover crops.

Grass seed was Oregon's fifth most valuable agricultural commodity in 2020, valued at more than \$458 million.

Nicole Anderson, an extension seed production specialist for Oregon State University, said last year's grass seed crop was down 30-50% amid a region-wide drought and heat wave peaking temperatures in June as high as 117 degrees.

By contrast, the weather station at OSU in Corvallis recorded one of the wettest springs in 2022 on record dating back to 1875, Anderson said.

Anderson reiterated concerns about lower pollination rates in some grass varieties, though later-maturing types such as tall fescue and perennial ryegrass may be less affected, she said.

Across the board, Anderson said the increased precipitation should be a boon to seed quality.

"Usually, having access to soil moisture when the seed is filling means you have heavier seed," she said, adding that with so much rain, there was little to no need for irrigation. "Almost every acre was like being in an irrigated field."

Denver Pugh, of Pugh Seed Farm

in Shedd, Ore., said he is about halfway through harvesting his grass seed crops, and has observed lower yields tied to reduced pollination.

"A lot of it has come in subpar," Pugh said. "It looked like it was going to be a good year. We had a lot of moisture, the plants looked good and healthy. ... I just don't think we had the best weather for pollination."

In the case of tall fescue, which he grows for forage, Pugh said yields were even less than a year ago in the heat and drought. Orchardgrass was similarly impacted, and he just began combining his annual ryegrass on July 27.

Pugh said pollen is normally so thick from his grass seed fields that he can see the dust collecting on the road. He did not see that this year.

Between the last year's drought and this year's rain, Pugh said the two seasons could not have been more different, yet they produced the same result.

"It will pan out to be just as bad as last year, if not worse," he said.

Federal grant will help Oregon ranchers study non-lethal wolf deterrents

By **GEORGE PAVEN**
Capital Press

The USDA has awarded a \$100,000 grant to the nonprofit Western Landowners Alliance to test new non-lethal tools ranchers can use to protect their livestock from wolves.

Funding comes from the Natural Resources Conservation Service through its Conservation Innovation Grants program, which supports the development of new management strategies to improve natural resource conservation on private lands.

The alliance will work with four ranchers and three county wolf committees in Oregon, evaluating different approaches to minimize wolf-livestock conflicts — including range riders, high-tech cameras and composting dead animal carcasses.

"My goal, or my biggest hope, is that this project is going to help working lands remain viable," said Ellie Gage, who is administering the NRCS grant. "The deck is already stacked



Steve Tool/EO Media Group

An Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist uses shears on the carcass of a calf that was killed by a wolf. Using an NRCS grant, ranchers will be testing non-lethal means of keeping wolves away from livestock.

against these producers."

Gage and her husband, Mark, ranch in Central Oregon, where they run a small herd of cattle near Prineville and Powell Butte.

She is also chairwoman of the Crook County wolf committee.

For the last several years, Gage said she has been involved in the alliance, participating in the group's Women in Ranching program. In May, she was asked to do outreach for the NRCS grant proposal, recruiting partners interested in studying non-lethal deterrents.

"The response was really overwhelming," she said.

Four livestock producers signed up — two in Wallowa County, one in Baker County and one in southwest Oregon.

Wolf committees in Wallowa, Baker and Grant counties agreed to collaborate, as well as Prairie City in Grant County, which has a site for composting roadkill and dead livestock.

The grant was awarded July 15, and will reimburse ranchers for half their costs as they implement non-lethal methods aimed at keeping wolves away from sheep and cattle.

Gage said two producers will experiment with high-frequency

radio ear tags on their cattle. The idea is that will allow range riders to locate herds more quickly and efficiently in large pastures, lowering costs and maintaining a more consistent human presence among herds to scare off wolves.

"Some of these allotments might be several thousand acres," Gage said. "If you can spend less time looking for your cows, and locate them quickly with the help of ear tags, then you can get to them ... more efficiently."

Another piece of technology that Gage said she is excited to try is a new game camera being developed with artificial intelligence that can be programmed to identify specific animals and notify producers.

"There is a huge need for the producer to have real-time information on where the predators are, and when they are there," she said. "They can go and incorporate their non-lethal tools and human presence when they need to be there. Hopefully, it will make non-lethal tools that

much more effective."

In Prairie City, Gage said composting dead livestock may prove to be an effective technique for ridding ranches of carcasses that might otherwise attract wolves.

"If we can minimize those attractants, everybody wins," she said.

The NRCS grant is meant to build on similar livestock-predator conflict prevention work the alliance is undertaking in other states, including Washington, Idaho, Montana, California, New Mexico and Arizona.

By proving which tools are most effective in different areas and terrain, Gage said it could lead to a more permanent source of funding to assist ranchers.

"The end goal of this project is to provide durable funding for producers who are facing the challenges of sharing working lands with wildlife," she said. "The work that they're putting into preventing conflict with their livestock is not sustainable financially."



A LOT OF ENERGY GOES INTO EVERY PLANT WE GROW. AND NOW, SO DO A LOT OF ENERGY SAVINGS.

We put a lot of energy into our plants - we always have. But with our new high-efficiency HVAC system, a lot less of that energy is being wasted - thanks to the help and guidance of Energy Trust of Oregon. See what they can do for your business at [EnergyTrust.org/for-business](https://www.energytrust.org/for-business).

ENERGY TRUST for BUSINESS
Run Better

EnergyTrust
of Oregon

Serving customers of Portland General Electric, Pacific Power, NW Natural, Cascade Natural Gas and Avista.