

Union County sunflower seeds grow on world stage

Farmers export seed for fields in Europe, Middle East

By **DICK MASON**
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UNION COUNTY — The outlook for sunflower seed crops in Union County appears solid this spring.

Relatively warm spring weather means farmers will begin planting their crops in mid April, about two weeks earlier than in 2020 when conditions were colder and wetter, said Rob Beck, the owner of Alicel Feed and Seed.

The earlier planting is a plus because it means sunflower seeds could be harvested in late September, when the weather is normally dry and warm. When sunflowers are harvested in October there is a much greater risk that bad weather could greatly impede the process, Beck said.

A total of 1,800 acres of sunflowers are expected to be grown in Union County this year by about seven growers. All of the growers are subcontractors of Alicel Feed and Seed, which has contracts with multinational companies it provides the seeds to.

Union County's sunflower seed growers include Justin Heffernan of North Powder. Heffernan enjoys raising sunflowers, but he knows they will cause him early morning anxiety in September. He said elk often feed on his sunflowers long before sunrise.

"Elk are a big problem," Heffernan said.

Especially between midnight and 4 a.m.

"That is when they come down to eat breakfast," Heffernan said, noting that elk find the oil in the mature heads of sunflowers irresistible.

To negate this threat, Heffer-



A sunflower field in the Grande Ronde Valley, with Mount Emily in the background.

Eric Valentine/Contributed Photo

nan obtains a permit from the state allowing him to have someone lightly haze any elk that approach his sunflower field. Noises are made to scare the elk away. The hazing is effective, but it takes a toll.

"You have to have someone up all night," said Heffernan, who works closely with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife when planning hazing.

Sunflowers are vulnerable to elk, but they can withstand weather events such as hail storms because of protective tissue, Heffernan said. He has seen many sunflower plants have large holes in their leaves from hail, but that has not prevented the plants from growing and producing seeds.

The ability to withstand hail is a strength that endears sunflowers to farmers such as Heffernan



Sunflowers in bloom in the North Powder Valley, with the Elkhorn Mountains in the background.

Justin Heffernan/Contributed Photo

because there is little they can do to protect crops from this natural phenomenon.

"Hail can humble any farmer," Heffernan said.

Sunflowers also hold up well against heavy rain, especially in the fall. Beck noted in the fall sunflowers tend to face downward from their stalks, thus the

seeds are not hit by rain.

Another plus is that little needs to be done to protect sunflower plants from weeds once the plants are mature. Heffernan said sunflowers' large leaves block sunlight from the area around them.

"The shade canopy prevents weeds from growing," he said.

Sunflowers also are easy on the irrigation budget because they need relatively little water.

"I get to use more water for other crops," Heffernan said.

Watching sunflower plants develop is an interesting experience for many because of how they react to the sun, Heffernan said. Some varieties when young begin the day facing east but then turn west as they follow the sun's journey across the sky.

"They are like a sundial," Heffernan said.

The plants stop following the sun when they get older, he said, because their cell tissue hardens.

Much of the sunflower seed Heffernan and other farmers grow in Union County ends up in Europe and the Middle East after Alicel Feed and Seed provides the product to multinational companies, Beck said.

The locally grown seeds are then used to grow more sunflowers, rather than turned into oil or other products.

Union County seeds will produce plants that will create between 3,000 and 4,000 pounds of sunflower seed per acre.

Farmers have been growing sunflowers in Union County for about two decades, and Beck said he believes the crop has a solid future here. He credited the bright outlook to the quality of people working in agriculture.

"We have a lot of very good farmers," Beck said.

He noted many have grown other seed crops here. This means they understand the seed certification process, he said, and how to create "export-quality" seed.