

No guarantee for federal tax refunds within three weeks

By **DAVID LIGHTMAN**
McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — More people are getting bigger federal tax refunds this year, but not everyone will receive their refund within the 21 days the Internal Revenue Service promised.

The IRS in a statement last week said it “cautions taxpayers not to rely on receiving a refund by a certain date, especially when making major purchases or paying bills.”

It explained that “some returns may require additional review and may take longer. Also, remember to take into consideration the time it takes for a financial institution to post the refund to an account or to receive it by mail.”

The good news: Most people filing returns electronically, with no errors and no unusual circumstances, should see the refund in their account within 21 days.

The IRS reported last week that as of March 11, it had issued 45.3 million refunds and taxpayers got an average refund of \$3,352. That’s up from \$2,967 last year, when there were no child tax credits or some other breaks in effect in 2021.

Claudia Stanley, a certified public accountant in Fresno, California, said she believed people are getting refunds in a timely fashion this year.

“I’ve had a few clients comment back to me that they got their refund and no complaints so far of refunds not coming through,” she said.

If there is a need to contact the IRS, though, consumers are likely to still find frustration. Erin Collins, the National Taxpayer Advocate, reported last month that callers to the IRS had a difficult time reaching an agency employee.

She said the problem was a “toxic combination” of inadequate staffing, COVID-19-related problems, and new tasks assigned to the agency, such as distributing economic stimulus payments. Last year, callers to the IRS’ toll free line reached an employee 11% of the time, Collins said.

The IRS has been trying to hire more people to help resolve the problem.

“Getting through to the IRS is still challenging,” said Stanley. “I had a stack of issues to resolve that kept mounting through February as I couldn’t get through even on the practitioner priority service line. Finally, in early March I was able to get through several times.”

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Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Sean Lerner, owner and operator of Eastern Wheelworks, works on the wheel of a customer’s mountain bike inside his shop in downtown La Grande on Saturday, March 26, 2022.

A smooth ride

Eastern Wheelworks marks first year of operation, draws long-distance customers

By **DICK MASON** // The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Eastern Wheelworks bike shop in La Grande marked the anniversary of its first year of operation on Saturday, March 26.

While no celebration was conducted, there is a lot to celebrate.

Business is brisk at the shop, which specializes in making customized hand-built wheels and maintaining and rebuilding mountain bike suspension systems. The services offered are proving so popular that Eastern Wheelworks, 1211 Washington Ave., is receiving mountain bike suspension parts to repair and upgrade from as far away as California and Western Washington.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Sean Lerner, owner and operator of Eastern Wheelworks, applies an adhesive repair tape to a customer’s bike rim at his shop in downtown La Grande on Saturday, March 26, 2022.

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Eastern Oregon farm turns to desert-adapted sheep to improve dairy business

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

LEXINGTON — Farm owner Terry Felda has seen firsthand the value of matching genetics to environment: raising a breed of dairy sheep adapted to her region’s specific microclimate.

Introducing genetics from the Assaf breed into her flock the past few years has been transformational, boosting productivity and improving her farm’s sustainability.

“We can already see the difference,” said Felda, 59.

For more than a decade, Felda ran her operation with standard American dairy sheep crosses: Lacaune and East Friesian breeds. The problem was that these breeds need good pasture and a temperate climate to thrive, and Felda’s 450-acre farm lies among the dry, crumpled hills outside Lexington, in Eastern Oregon’s semi-arid Morrow County.

Felda’s ewes struggled on ranges with limited forage.

“I felt I had to put a lot of feed and time into them to get them to where I wanted,” she said.

For years, she wanted



Dairy sheep are milked at Tin Willows Sheep Dairy and Ranch outside Lexington, Morrow County.

Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

to bring in genetics from breeds better adapted to arid climates, such as the Awassi, native to Israel, or the Assaf, a cross between the Awassi and the German East Friesian sheep.

The Assaf, according to the Israel Dairy Board, is prized for high milk production and tolerance to almost all climates. The breed has spread across Eurasia and today is the most important dairy sheep breed in Spain, according

to the Journal of Dairy Science.

Felda was one of many American farmers who wanted Assaf genetics, but for years, the U.S. sheep importation over concerns about scrapie, a disease that affects sheep.

Finally, in 2017, after years of negotiations with the USDA, the Spanish Department of Agriculture and European Union officials, the U.S. sheep industry brought in Assaf

semen through a University of Wisconsin-Madison project.

The Dairy Sheep Association of North America secured some of the semen, from which Felda got her first batch for Tin Willows Sheep Dairy and Ranch.

“To be able to finally get (the genetics) was huge,” Felda said.

In 2019, she introduced the semen into her flock through laparoscopic artificial insemination. In 2020,

she had her first cross-bred 50% Assaf lambs. In 2021, she milked the crosses.

Felda said the Assaf-crosses gain weight faster and seem well-adapted to handle heat, stress and minimal forage. The ewes also produce more milk.

Before introducing the new genetics, each Lacaune-East Friesian dairy sheep was fed and milked twice a day but produced only 300 to 400 pounds of milk annually. Last year,

each 50% Assaf ewe was fed and milked only once a day but produced up to 500 pounds of milk annually.

Felda expects the numbers would be higher if she milked twice daily, and because last year’s milk came from crosses, Felda anticipates even higher production in future years as her ewes approach purebred Assaf status.

Some farms in Felda’s industry started on the genetic improvement path years before she did and are seeing even larger gains, with some ewes producing 1,000 pounds of milk annually.

“I’m playing catch-up,” she said.

She spoke over the chorus of farm sounds around her: chattering guinea fowl, quacking ducks, bleating lambs and the occasional bark of an Akbash livestock guardian dog.

Felda said the combination of imported genetics and new record-keeping programs available to farmers gives her renewed hope for America’s dairy sheep industry.

“It’s an exciting time to be milking sheep right now,” she said. “And it’s been a long time coming.”