

Homegrown



Ripe for the planting

Hermiston area boasts right mix for diverse harvest

By JENNIFER COLTON
Staff Writer

Eastern Oregon isn't just for potatoes any more.

Diversification is the name of the industry, and the Columbia Basin now hosts more than 200 different crops from the familiar to the exotic.

"We are famous for a few crops, but there are some really diverse crops being grown here," said Silvia Rondon, an entomologist at Oregon State University's Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center. "The Columbia Basin is a prime site for growing any crops because we have excellent soil, excellent temperature, long days, cool nights, and we have a lot of water. Those things have made this really a prime site for growing crops."

While potatoes — Oregon, Washington and Idaho produce more than 55 percent of all potatoes grown in the United States — and onions continue to flourish in Umatilla and Morrow counties, the blueberry industry is flourishing and growers are testing the waters with quinoa, a grain crop with cereal-like edible seeds.

Blueberries, typically associated with Western Oregon have increased "tremendously" in this area, according to Rondon, driven in part by droughts in California. Economic drivers, such as the establishment of Pioneer Seed in Hermiston, have driven increases in other crops, such as seed corn, which has also seen a large increase in the past five years.

"If we're expanding in our production area, that means there's a demand," Rondon said. "Besides all of the environmental qualities of this area, we also have the different facilities in our ports nearby where you can transport all your products by water, train, (or) by land."

The biggest challenge toward bringing in a new crop is the amount of time needed to gather data and testing, Rondon said. With the case of blueberries, for example, Umatilla County will need to establish the crop and gather years of data before any conclusions can be made regarding yield and quality between Eastern Oregon blueberries and those from other areas.

Diversification does have other benefits, however. With diverse crops and rotations, it is harder for pests and diseases to thrive or resist treatments. Rondon points to the Midwest and the difficulties with having a corn monoculture where insects and diseases



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY OSU-HAREC

Corn is one crop growing in popularity and acreage in Umatilla County thanks to the development of Pioneer Seed.

2012, Umatilla County Agricultural Commodity Sales:

- 37 percent — Wheat
- 15 percent — Cattle
- 13 percent — Potatoes
- 10 percent — Tree fruits and nuts (including blueberries and grapes)
- 7 percent — "Other" vegetable and truck crops
- 7 percent — Other crops
- 5 percent — Alfalfa hay
- 3 percent — other animal products
- 2 percent — grass and legume seeds
- 1 percent — dry storage onions

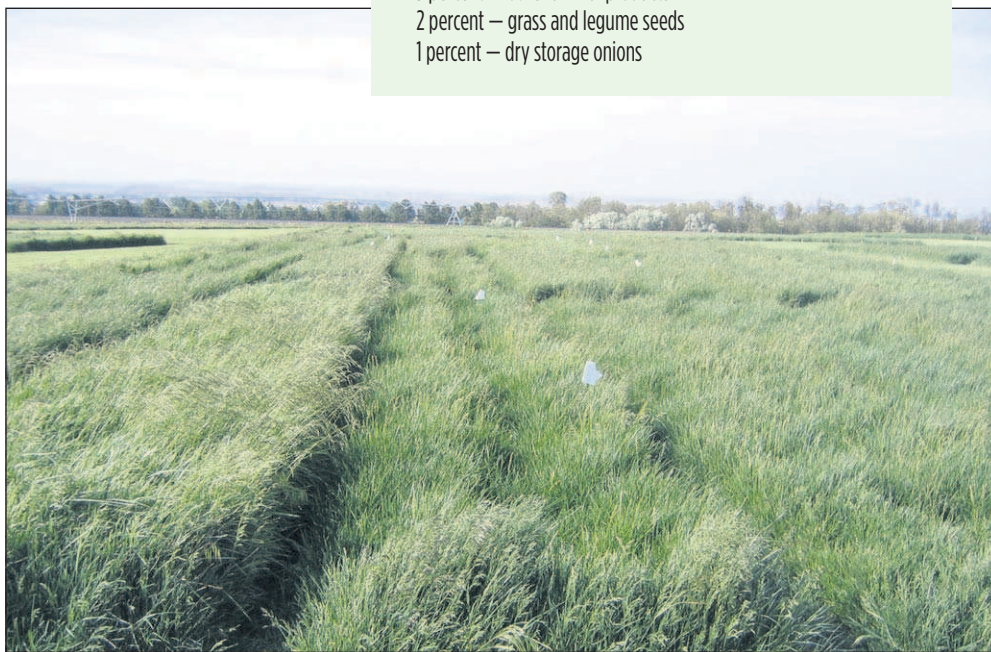


PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY OSU-HAREC

Far from the potatoes and onions the region is known for, grass seed grows well in Eastern Oregon and has become a popular crop.

take hold quickly, compared to Eastern Oregon with a wide crop base.

"Being diverse is a re-

ally good thing for many reasons," she said. "I think people know that we grow, here in this area, potatoes,

there is wheat, there is corn, there is watermelon, but there is so much more to the list."

HUNGER:

continued from Page A1

since 2006, when farmers donated 200,000 pounds of food.

Through Farmers Ending Hunger, growers set aside a portion of their crops to donate to the Oregon Food Bank, which distributes the food around the state. Sometimes it's a short road between a farmer donating a truckload of potatoes and a family collecting a bag of potatoes from a food bank. Other times there is a more complicated process in play, such as selling wheat and using the profits to pay for pancake mix to be donated.

Ziari said many programs to feed the hungry focus on putting to use food that is past its expiration date or too ugly to sell in a store, but Farmers Ending Hunger strives to preserve the dignity of it recipients by planting high-quality produce for them.

"We're providing the right food at the right time," he said.

Farmers Ending Hunger also receives support from individuals and organizations who provide money through the nonprofit's "Adopt an Acre" program that helps defray costs for packaging and shipping the food donated by farmers.

John Burt, executive director of Farmers Ending Hunger, said while farmers in other states sometimes work with food banks one on one, the farmer-driven model of Farmers Ending Hunger is fairly unique. He said the networking between people in the agricultural community has been invaluable for drawing in large donations of food.

"They may have connected with the food bank anyway, but the fact that we have a close relationship, people are more willing ... Those kinds of connections are a key thing," he said.

Burt said the growth from 2.5 million pounds

of food donated in 2014 to 4.2 million donated in 2015 came from some new farms contributing but also some longtime participants, including Riverpoint Farms and Amstad Produce, stepping up what they contributed. The nonprofit has also branched out from produce and now has farmers contributing items like skim milk and hamburger. They are slated for more growth in 2016, including an offering from orchardists in The Dalles of 10,000 to 20,000 pounds of cherries a week during this summer's growing season.

The Oregon Food Bank distributes about 90 million pounds of food a year, Burt said, so Farmers Ending Hunger isn't going to solve all of Oregon's hunger problems with an extra 4.2 million pounds. But the fresh produce does create healthier, better-quality options than some of what comes through the food banks' door.

Darrin Ditchen, who manages the Stanfield site of Golden Valley Farms, said he has been involved with Farmers Ending Hunger from the beginning. He said when Ziari started approaching local growers with the idea, he thought it was "genius."

"It's awesome," he said. "It's a cool thing. I love being a part of it."

Back then Golden Valley Farms' Stanfield site grew peas, so Ditchen pledged 2 percent of the pea crop. Then they switched to wheat and Ditchen started donating a percentage of the wheat. As the site has switched more to growing grass to be harvested for seed, Ditchen still makes sure he donates a portion of the profits to the program.

He said one great thing about the nonprofit is that it's efficient and easy — everyone just grows what they do best, whether it's onions or peas, and then donates a percentage of each acre instead of selling it.

"If you spread it out farm-wide, you don't even notice it," he said.

GET SPRING READY!!



DESERT COBBLER
SHOE & BOOT REPAIR

All Brands
Leather Goods
Ball Mitts • Gun Cases

39 years of experience

541-567-2008

120 NE 3rd St., Hermiston
Mon-Fri 8am-5pm

YOUR CHOICE OF VALLEY® SAYS IT ALL.

You know what it takes to be successful. Water management is too important to entrust to anyone other than Valley®. Our commitment to unmatched performance and technology leadership keeps operations like yours thriving.



VALMONT NORTHWEST INC.
80568 Hwy 395 North, Hermiston, OR

Hermiston	541-564-0490
Pasco, WA	509-547-1623
Basin City, WA	509-269-4725
Sunnyside, WA	509-837-9006