

ODA opens more areas for canola

Vegetable, clover growers concerned crop could spread

By Mitch Lies; Capital Press

SALEM -- The Oregon Department of Agriculture has opened hundreds of thousands of acres in the Willamette Valley to canola production.

In a temporary rule announced Aug. 3, the department opened nearly 1.7 million acres in the valley to canola that previously were off limits, including about 480,000 acres suitable for canola production.

Previously, only a sliver of acreage on the outskirts of the valley was open to canola production.

The temporary rule will take effect once it is filed with the secretary of state, expected to occur Aug. 10.

Canola production has been restricted in the valley since 2005 to protect vegetable seed crops from an increase in pest pressure, which some growers say is imminent if canola takes root.

The rule will be in effect for at least the next growing season, ODA Director Katy Coba said.

The department plans to adopt a permanent rule before the temporary rule expires in February.

Under the rule, canola production remains prohibited on about 2 million acres in the heart of the Willamette Valley, where nearly 85 percent of the valley's specialty seed is produced. But growers outside what the department is calling the "fully protected zone" will be free to produce canola, provided they let specialty seed growers know where it is grown.

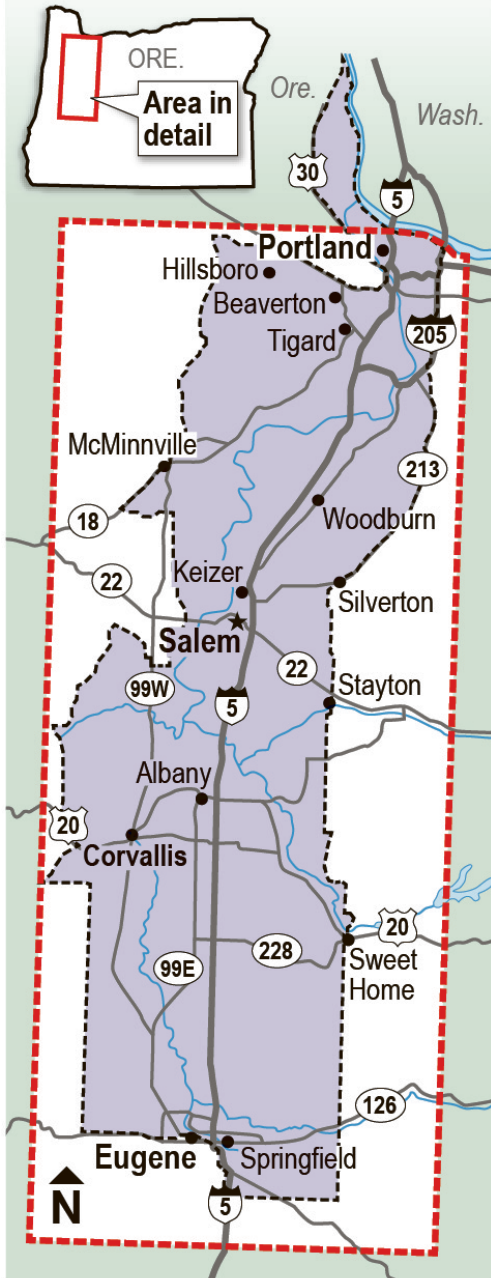
Fresh vegetable, specialty seed and clover seed growers said they were disappointed in the rule.

Fresh market vegetable grower Mike Iverson, from Aurora, said it will lead to an increase in cabbage maggot pressure and plant diseases, such as sclerotinias and mosaic viruses, that are common among vegetables and canola.

He also expressed concern about the potential for canola to spread along roadsides and ditches and into grower fields.

Willamette Valley canola restrictions

-  Canola control district
(production allowed)
-  Canola-free zone



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

"They will not manage the volunteers," said Iverson, who is a past president of the Oregon Fresh Market Growers Association. "Over time, this valley will become a yellow mess.

"There is plenty of documentation about the problems this stuff brings," Iverson said. "For (ODA) to ignore good science and previous history is absolutely stupid."

John McCulley, administrator of the Oregon Clover Commission, said his growers are concerned about the potential for canola to spread into clover fields.

"There is a concern about the expansion of areas where canola can be grown, specifically in Washington County, where most of the nation's crimson (clover) is grown (for seed)," McCulley said.

"When canola gets into clover, it hurts the salability of the product," he said.

"It is difficult to lose the protection from canola that the previous exclusion zone provided," said Greg Loberg, public relations chair of the Willamette Valley Specialty Seed Association and manager of West Coast Beet Seed in Salem. "This is a loss, and it is difficult."

Tomas Endicott, vice president of business development for the oilseed crusher Willamette Biomass Processors in Rickreall, characterized the new rule as "a reasonable compromise."

"The goal from the beginning was to have a way for specialty seed growers and grain growers who were looking for rotation crops to co-exist," he said. "And I think this does that."

Dean Freeborn, a grass seed and wheat grower from Rickreall, said he was pleased with the rule and planned to plant some canola this fall. "We'll have at least a couple of fields in it," he said.

ODA last updated its canola rule in 2009, when it essentially kept in place the valley-wide ban on its production. Asked what changed between then and now, Coba said: "There was just a lot of continued interest in canola and wanting to grow canola.

"Our job was to try to balance the interests of both sides, to protect a very viable and economically profitable specialty seed industry in the Willamette Valley, as well as provide for the opportunity to grow some canola in the valley," Coba said. "We believe you can revise that boundary and yet still provide protection for the specialty seed industry," she said.

The Willamette Valley specialty seed industry generates between \$40 million and \$50 million a year in farm gate value for growers who contract with vegetable seed companies to provide high-quality seed for domestic and overseas markets.

Growers work together to isolate crops that can cross pollinate, such as the brassicas broccoli and cauliflower. Canola, also a brassica, is grown as an industrial oil crop, for biofuels and food-grade oil.

Freeborn said he is looking to grow canola as a rotation crop for food-grade oil and to sell to Willamette Biomass Processors, where it is crushed and used for biodiesel. Willamette Biomass also sells the byproduct left after processing for feed.

ODA made no special consideration for transgenic canola, despite a concern from vegetable seed growers that traits from genetically modified canola could contaminate their crops, many of which are sold in overseas markets opposed to genetic modification.

"Since (genetically modified) canola has been deregulated by USDA, ODA does not differentiate between conventional and GM canola, or treat them differently," Coba said.

Endicott said he doesn't buy genetically modified canola and doesn't intend to start. Freeborn said he is considering producing some. "It would be a plus to be able to use that, because we have some fields that are getting some pretty consistent grass in them," he said.

ODA has scheduled a public hearing on the proposed permanent rule at 9 a.m. Sept. 28 in the hearings room in the basement of the Agriculture Building in Salem at 635 Capitol St. NE. The permanent rule mirrors the temporary rule, the department said.