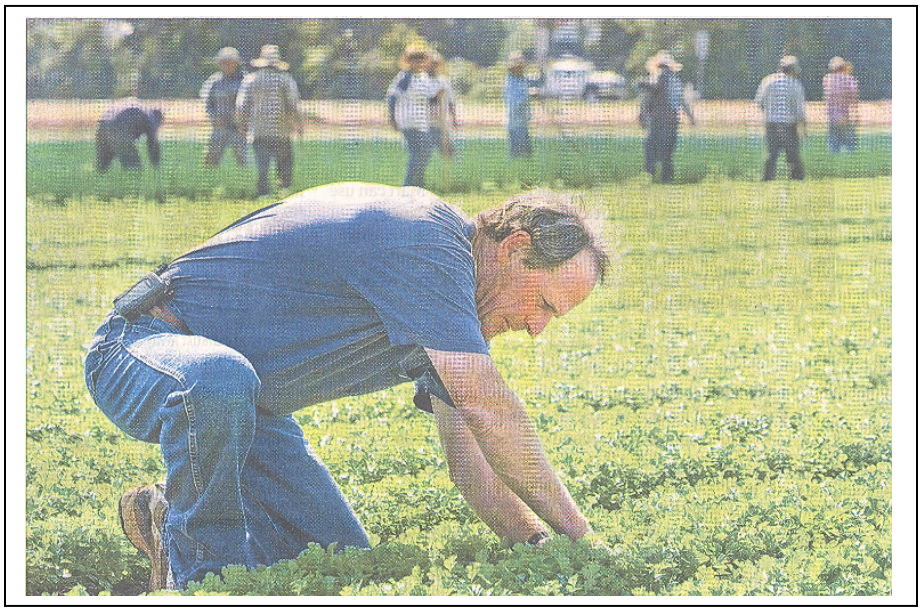
Canola good for biofuels, bad for other crops

The Oregonian

Sept. 1, 2009

Eric Mortensen



Mike Iverson of Aurora Farms grows cilantro and other retail produce crops south of Wilsonville. Iverson says if canola is planted nearby it could easily spread to his fields through seeds carried by the winds or birds, causing contamination and cross-pollination that would harm his crops.

With a national push on to develop alternatives to fossil fuels, Oregon may seem well-positioned to benefit. The Willamette Valley in particular has the capacity to grow a significant amount of canola seeds, which can be crushed to yield oil for bio-diesel or for food.

Canola grows well on fields now used for grass seed, providing an option to valley growers hard hit by a glutted market and now largely prohibited from using field burning to kill weeds. Canola is a broadleaf plant that can break disease cycles like fire does, it doesn't require irrigation, and it can be planted and harvested with the same equipment used for grass seed.

Energy tax credits also make canola an attractive alternative to growers, and a seed-crushing facility capable of producing 3 million to 4 million gallons of oil a year opened in Rickreall in 2008.

So what's not to like?

Plenty, say farmers who raise other specialty-seed crops and fresh-market vegetables. They say canola is an invasive plant that can harm their crops with cross-pollination, diseases and competition from "volunteer" plants that spring up from scattered seed.

Canola's tiny seeds "can escape from anything but a bank vault" and it "usually ends up spread all over," says Aurora farmer Mike Iverson, who grows spinach, radishes, green onions, parsley and the Chinese cabbage bok choy.

So far, farmers such as Iverson have carried the day. Anyone who wants to grow canola for oil within the "protected districts" of the Willamette Valley, Central Oregon and a sliver of northeastern Oregon can only do so on a research basis and has to get a permit from the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

And even that requires 3 miles separation between canola and other crops, that seed trucks cover their loads and that canola can be grown on individual fields only one year out of four.

Tomas Endicott, vice president of Willamette Biomass Processors Inc., which opened the oil extraction plant in Rickreall, thinks the restrictions are overkill. He believes an additional 1,000 to 2,000 acres of canola could be grown for oil in the valley without harming other crops.

Others sharply disagree. While they oppose canola, they say oil seed crops such as camelina, flax and soybeans would be more acceptable. Those crops, however, do not yield as much oil as canola.

The agriculture department and an advisory group of farmers, researchers and producers on both sides worked for five months to find a solution, said Dan Hilburn, the department's Plant Division administrator.

The result is a public policy quandary. How does Oregon encourage the fledgling biofuel industry without harming other farmers?

"It's a dilemma for the department," Hilburn said. "This is two competing agricultural interests that aren't compatible with each other in the same area.

"We talked about it for five months and basically could not come up with anything different that would work for everybody," he said. Even

researchers from Oregon State University came to conflicting conclusions, he said.

The ag department is expected to adopt canola rules this month that largely leave the existing system in place. The flap comes as Oregon's oil seed production overall has shown promise; the crop production doubled in value in 2008 to more than $2 million.

But the state has chosen a cautious approach, Hilburn said.

"There are not a lot of areas in the world where you can grow specialty seed," he said. "We have a special situation in Oregon-but there are a lot of places where you can grow canola. For now we're protecting an existing industry rather than develop a new one in canola."