

Farmers search for alternatives as Oregon's grass seed industry declines in acreage, value and smoke

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The Oregonian, August 14, 2011



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Dust envelops grass seed farmer Denver Pugh as the harvest picks up pace. Oregon farmers are looking for alternatives as the grass seed market declines.

It's the summer of discontent for Oregon's grass seed industry, once king of the Willamette Valley. The market remains poor and the list of successful, money-making alternative crops is short. On top of that, the harvest is two weeks late.

Blame the economy for most of it. The recession continues to clamp the housing and construction market, limiting the demand for grass in parks, lawns and sports fields and leaving growers holding surplus seed. The Oregon Department of Agriculture says the crop's sales value dropped from about \$469 million in 2008 to about \$228 million in 2010.

Acreage planted in grass seed varieties is dropping steadily as well, from 489,600 in 2008 to 375,665 in 2010. As recently as 2005, Oregon farmers planted 528,760 acres in grass seed, according to figures compiled by Bill Young, a semi-retired Oregon State University professor.

On the other hand, the towering plumes of field burning smoke that used to mark summers

in the valley have nearly been legislated out of existence. Oregon farmers used to torch up to 250,000 acres of grass stubble and straw each summer. But a horrific, smoke-caused pileup on Interstate 5 that killed seven people in 1988, plus continued health and environmental concerns, resulted in legislation that progressively reduced the acreage that can be burned.

Since 2010, burning is limited to a maximum of 15,000 acres per year, primarily confined to the Silverton Hills area of Marion County and permitted only with three varieties of perennial grass. About 1,000 acres have been burned so far this summer.

Farmers must register fields in advance, pay a burn fee of \$20 an acre and wait for permission to burn fields, said John Byers, who's managed the state's smoke management program for nine years.



When weather conditions and wind direction allow burning, Byers' office alerts farmers and they have an hour to light the field. Done under the right conditions, smoke rapidly goes "up and away and out" in high columns.

Grass seed was introduced in the 1920s and ruled the valley for decades, with Oregon leading the nation in production and proclaiming itself the "grass seed capital of the world."

Farmers burned fields after harvest to kill diseases and get rid of straw left after harvesting. The practice killed weeds and pests, broke disease cycles and made it possible to plant "grass after grass after grass" on the same fields for years running, said **George Pugh**, a third-generation grower in the Linn County town of Shedd, about 12 miles southeast of Corvallis. His son, Denver, manages the farm.

Pugh isn't allowed to burn his fields now because he does not farm in the Silverton Hills area. Like many farmers, he now uses chemicals instead of fire to clean fields for the next year.

The problems and complications of grass seed farming caused many Willamette Valley growers to plant wheat instead, and more are looking to diversify if possible, Pugh said.

Pugh said he rotates about 30 percent of his grass seed acreage, growing radishes, turnips, wheat, cereal rye, clover and meadowfoam -- which produces oil-bearing seeds used to make cosmetics.



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Pugh checks with his crew working at the family farm near Shedd.

However, efforts to grow something else are limited by soil type, the need for summer irrigation and the expense of systems to drain pools of winter rain from fields, Pugh said. Grass varieties can handle wet winters and dry summers, but other crops aren't as forgiving.

"In this south valley, there are a lot of heavy-clay fields that aren't well drained," Pugh said. "It's difficult to find alternative crops for that ground."

It can cost \$1,000 an acre to install underground tile or pipe systems that route excess water off fields, he said. Irrigation systems are expensive, too, and may require new wells.

Another complication: The demand for some specialized alternative crops is limited, and it's easy to swamp the market.

"We're still finding a few more; there's another crop every year we can use on the ground," Pugh said.