

Oregon defines acreage where controversial canola can be grown

Eric Mortenson, The Oregonian

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A field of canola blooms near Rickreall in a 2008 field trial. The plant's seeds contain oil for fuel or food.

Attempting to end a years-long argument no one was winning, the **Oregon Department of Agriculture** decided to **expand the areas** where canola can be grown in the Willamette Valley.

The decision, announced late Friday afternoon, will anger some **specialty seed growers**. For years, cabbage, radish, turnip and pumpkin seed growers worried canola would damage their \$32 million industry with cross-pollination, pests or diseases.

Fresh-market vegetable growers also don't like canola. Opponents of genetically-modified plants have chimed in as well, saying the ag department opened the door to GMO contamination of specialty crops in the valley and railroaded the decision.

On the other side, some farmers and processors believe canola is a viable option that was unfairly restricted. Canola produces tiny, dark seeds that are crushed to produce bio-diesel or food-grade oil. It's a profitable crop that can be planted in rotation every few years to break disease cycles that occur

when the same crops are planted in fields year after year. It doesn't require irrigation and can be planted and harvested with the same equipment used for grasses and grains.



Department Director **Katy Coba** defended the decision, saying the two sides could not find common ground and she needed to move quickly in order for farmers to make planting decisions this fall.

"We truly do not want to damage any sector of agriculture," she said. "We're trying to find a balance."

The state adopted a **temporary rule** that expires in 180 days but allows canola planting this fall. At the same time, the ag department is pursuing a permanent rule that will allow public comment and possible revisions of the growing areas.

The two sides have made their case for more than 10 years, with neither budging much. Previously, the state managed the problem by establishing a 48- by 120-mile rectangle in the Willamette Valley -- nearly 3.7 million

acres -- in which canola could not be grown without a permit. Some test plots were allowed in 2007-09, but no other permits were issued.

An advisory group representing both sides met with the Department of Agriculture several times this year, but was unable to reach consensus.

On Friday, the state announced its decision. It retains a 2 million acre district in which canola isn't allowed, but identifies 480,000 acres at the district edges that may be suitable for canola. Because canola is grown in rotation, planted on individual fields only two years out of every five, the department doesn't expect large acreage to be converted to canola production.

The temporary rule requires an electronic "pinning" system that tracks which crops are planted where. The system, already in place for seed crops, enforces a three-mile separation between fields to prevent contamination.

In a news release, the agriculture department said the restricted area prohibits canola from 84 percent of the specialty seed acreage planted in the past three years.

Coba believes Willamette Valley farmers could manage about 25,000 acres of canola without a problem. If canola acreage reached 75,000 to 100,000 acres, the situation would bear careful

watching, she said.

Tomas Endicott, vice president of **Willamette Biomass Processors**, a seed crushing plant in Rickreall, said a couple hundred acres now are planted in canola. He predicted farmers will be cautious about adding production.

"I don't think we'll see 10,000 acres anytime soon," he said.

The debate highlights one of the oddities of Oregon agriculture. Rather than produce one or two commodities such as corn and soy, the state grows about 200 commercial crops. A significant amount of the vegetables grown in Oregon aren't raised for food or livestock feed, but for the seeds they produce. The seed is sold to other farmers worldwide, and the assured purity of the state's seeds is a crucial factor in its value.

Friends of Family Farmers, an advocacy group based in Molalla, sharply criticized the department's action. Field Director Leah Rodgers said the decision "opens up the valley" to a genetically modified crop that could ruin seed quality.

Coba responded that genetically-modified canola has been deregulated, or approved as a crop, by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It's not the state's job to revisit that decision, she said, and the state doesn't have the expertise or resources to do so anyway. As a result, Oregon makes no distinction between GM and non-GM canola, Coba said.