

NewsWatch Briefs

Net farm incomes skyrocket in Idaho

University of Idaho College of Agricultural and Life Sciences economists estimate Idaho agriculture will collect record-high cash receipts of \$5.6 billion from 2007. That total reflects strong markets for beef, dairy, potatoes and wheat, and nearly all of the state's other crops. Cash receipts rose 25%, or \$1.1 billion, from 2006. The report is available at www.ag.uidaho.edu/aers/_outlooks.htm.

Changes made to potato insurance provisions

Changes made to the potato crop insurance provisions have been posted by USDA's Risk Management Agency. For information on these changes, visit the RMA Web site at www.rma.usda.gov/policies/2008policy.html.

Info helps producers make biofuel decisions

Even though there's a lot of buzz about biodiesel fuel, it's difficult for producers to get quality information to decide whether they want to pursue bioenergy crops. A new Montana State University Extension associate specialist's work is helping clarify the choices. For more, go to www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=5467.

Oregon shrimp fishery earns special honor

Oregon's pink shrimp fishery has earned the world's first sustainable shrimp certification under the Marine Stewardship Council certification program. "Oregon's pink shrimp fishery has achieved a very important milestone in sustainability that will bring international attention to our state," says Gov. Ted Kulongoski. "This achievement represents a significant step in identifying Oregon as a leader in sustainable resource management."

with farmers, food processors, distributors and school district food-service staff, as well as existing farm-to-school groups and programs to help get more nutritious, locally produced foods into Oregon schools.

MSU Extension specialists win national award

The American Society of Agronomy has honored two Montana State University Extension specialists. The organization gave Excellence Awards to Kent McVay, MSU Extension cropping system specialist, and Clain Jones, MSU Extension soil fertility specialist,



FIRE LINE: Looking out toward the Milford Flat where a wildfire burned, Blair Waldron, a USDA Agricultural Research Service plant geneticist in Logan, Utah, kneels in the transition zone where forage kochia halted the burn.

By T.J. BURNHAM

HALTING wildfires in their tracks is frequently on the minds of Utah ranchers, especially after last year's record 350,000-acre fire on Milford Flat along with other devastating fires throughout the state.

Not the noxious invasive weeds agricultural interests have fought for years, forage kochia can stop such fires in their tracks, says Blair Waldron, a USDA Agricultural Research Service plant geneticist in Logan, Utah.

"We've been researching forage kochia for years as a plus for cattlemen, but [last] year's fires and the role forage kochia played in halting the burns adds yet another plus to the value of these plants," he says.

It works like this: Most sprawling wildfires on the

for two recent publications: McVay's "Camelina Production in Montana" and Jones' "Urea Management Guide," for which he was a co-author.

Floyd to head national potato cooperative

At the annual meeting of United Potato Growers of America, Allen Floyd of Othello, Wash., was elected chairman of the grower co-op for 2008. The potato grower and partner of Harvest Fresh and HF Farms has served as chairman of United Potato Growers of Washington and northeast Oregon for three years.

Key Points

- Forage kochia is a proven wildfire barrier.
- Plants provide an alternative to alfalfa for cattle.
- New varieties are under study in Utah.

range are fueled by cheatgrass, labeled a major carrier of such burns. These dry plants provide ready fuel for summer fires. However, when the flames reach the forage kochia planted for fall and winter feed, these green, succulent plants stop the burning quickly. Even a few kochia that are consumed reproduce quickly for even more protection, says Waldron.

"Forage kochia is one of the few plants which become established and compete with cheatgrass," he notes.

Fire roadblock

In last year's big Utah fire, which burned the same area where an 18,000-acre blaze struck two decades ago, the devastation left an area known locally as the "blow-out" region. Here, little vegetation became re-established until forage kochia grew.

"When this latest fire came through, the kochia stopped it," states Waldron.

Make no mistake when talking about kochia. The forage variety is a perennial (sometimes called summer cypress); it's not the annual tumbleweed type farmers and ranchers struggle to control. Unlike the undesirable form, forage kochia is a plant with a woody base.

But forage kochia is getting

press for more than just a fire-retarding plant. For more than a decade, Waldron has probed new varieties that grow taller to survive above snow levels. He has tracked new forms of wheatgrasses for harsh, degraded lands.

"Ranchers are very impressed with forage kochia," he says. "I get calls every week from producers wanting to know about this plant."

With good reason. In Utah's Box Elder County, a study shows cows on forage kochia saved ranchers at least 24 cents per cow per day over those on alfalfa hay. "That savings is pretty conservative," says Waldron, who suspects ranchers are saving even more.

"These are high-protein plants," he says, "providing important feed in fall and winter. Ranchers I've worked with report that their cattle actually improve when eating forage kochia."

The cows in the study illustrated no significant differences in body condition scores whether they were on alfalfa or forage kochia, which was fed as a grass mix with minerals, but no other supplements.

Thousands of acres have been planted to forage kochia as a result.

The value of the plant is well-known in Nevada, where it is used to enhance vegetation on deer habitats in former sage brush areas that have burned. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management also uses forage kochia for green strips along roads, although BLM continues to opt mostly for native plants. Forage kochia is an introduced species.

Study finds plant a plus for livestock

A study in Box Elder County, Utah, shines with perks for cattle producers.

Led by USDA's Agricultural Research Service plant geneticist Blair Waldron, the research on annual cattle performance and economics of forage kochia yielded the following results:

- On average, kochia comprised 70% of initial dry-matter forage during drought years. It greatly improved yield potential of rangelands, and provided protein during the fall-winter grazing period.

- Cows on forage kochia pastures improved body condition, maintained backfat and were near optimum condition for calving and re-breeding.

- Forage kochia pastures cost growers about 70 cents per cow each day in estimated establishment and maintenance costs in kochia and crested wheatgrass pasture, based on forage disappearance of 33 pounds per cow per day. That compares with 94 cents for cows on alfalfa per day.

"Assuming a 100-day winter feeding period, a producer could realize a \$24-per-cow savings by grazing stockpiled forage kochia versus drylot feeding," says Waldron. This would lower annual cow-calf production costs by about 10%, he estimates, based on USDA's estimated cow-calf annual production costs for Western U.S. cattle of \$232 per cow.