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Arrangement keeps triticale production in line with demand

By SCOTT A. YATES Capital Press Staff Writer

SPOKANE – With more than 5,000 acres of winter triticale planted and expectations of 1,500 acres in spring varieties, the feed grain that combines the nutrition of wheat and rye is finally making headway in the market.

The region's egg-laying industry is including an ever-growing portion of triticale in poultry rations. Wilcox Farms was the first to begin replacing soybean meal and corn with triticale. National Farms is now making the shift.

The interest has caused a boomlet in triticale acreage in Washington, with land planted to the crop growing 200 percent a year for the past four years. With more production coming on line, the grain's supporters are considering new markets, including dairy cows, cattle and pigs.

Meanwhile, triticale has averaged about \$10 more a ton than barley on a local basis for the past three years, thanks to a pooling arrangement that helps keep production in line with demand. The marketing scheme resembles the approach favored by the Canadian Wheat Board, a similarity that doesn't escape growers who initially react against its monopolistic aspect.

Kurt Braunwart, managing owner of ProGene Plant Research, initially set up the pool. He subsequently handed over day-to-day responsibility for marketing to Howard Nelson of Central Washington Grain Growers.

Braunwart, who now coordinates research and development and nutrition work on triticale in the Northwest, said when benefits of the pool are explained to growers, there is very little resistance. About 50 farmers are currently producing the crop for CWGG.

The arrangement actually turns triticale from a commodity into a value-added product. Not only are all varieties grown for the pool kept separate by protein, each lot has a complete amino acid profile work-up.

Armed with that information and energy studies completed on each variety, Nelson is able to supply egg layers with an energy number directly comparable to corn. That makes it much easier for an expert in formulating rations to evaluate the correct price point for the ingredient.

Rene Lastreto, a ration consultant in California, helps formulate Wilcox's feed. Based on what he has seen of triticale's nutritional profile, he predicted good days ahead for the feed grain.

"I can foresee this ingredient being used extensively in the Pacific Northwest by not only egg producers, but swine and cattle feeders also," he said.

In the case of eggs, Lastreto said, it's important to remember feed makes up about 70 percent or more of the total cost of production. If local ingredients can be found to replace corn and soybean meal imported by rail and truck from the Midwest, "we are saving huge sums." Triticale's higher amino acid values also mean less supplementation is required, which results in another cost savings.

The nutritional profile of triticale, a combination of rye and durum, exceeds that of either of the two crops separately or even together.

“This is not just wheat plus rye. It is something one level enhanced beyond that in terms of the quality of the proteins,” Braunwart said. “In poultry and hogs, lysine is the most limiting amino acid, and in triticale, there is a higher percentage of lysine than in any other of your grains.”

So far, production hasn’t been able to keep up with demand from both egg companies. Nelson’s goal initially is to have enough supply to keep up with a 12-month demand from Wilcox and National. At the same time, he’s insistent the grain will not be overproduced.

“It’s an easy crop to grow. We have been growing the winter variety with a yield of 2 to 3 tons per acre on the moisture we’ve gotten the last two years,” Nelson said.

Emergence is one of the grain’s most attractive feature, with growers reporting the winter triticale variety out of ground four days quicker than Eltan. Some growers plant it on poor ground because it does better than wheat. Others like planting it on fall re-crop ground.

About 12,000 tons of triticale is expected to be produced this year. Nelson feels there is room to easily double that and still not exceed demand. Braunwart said the key is to go slowly and not flood the market.

“If we ever bump up to what Howard feels comfortable marketing, we’ll stop putting out seed,” Braunwart said.

George Fohner, president of Resource Seeds based in Gilroy, Calif., bred several of the varieties of triticale being grown in Washington. He is impressed with the work Nelson and Braunwart have done to balance supply and demand and said the region’s marketing is the most advanced in the nation.

“Historically, that has been one of the biggest obstacles: reassuring buyers we have a reliable supply and reassuring growers there is a place to sell it,” he said. “The work that Kurt and Howard have done is a model of success.”

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