

# PACIFIC NORTHWEST SEED PRODUCTION REPORT WINTER 2022



Drilling into dust on October 25th

## A look back

Harvest 2022 was met with mixed results. It ended a bit below expectations, but still a very welcome recovery from the dismal 2021. A dry winter was followed by an extended wet spring that raised many expectations of high yields across the Pacific Northwest seed production regions. That extended spring made for a very late harvest which often leads to high yields. In the end, however, most yields were not much different than long-term averages. Bushel weights were heavier than most years, but clean-outs were often higher than normal. Many explain the disappointing yields on the weather patterns that led to extended and erratic pollination and seed-set.

After harvest, growers began forward-planning and realizing that this was a fall to remove older and marginal stands. There is more open ground in the valley than we have seen in recent years. Much of this acreage has or will be planted to rotation crops. This fall, planting new grass fields has been difficult because conditions have been very dry. Growers with irrigation have had the option to get fields established on time. Those fields that rely on mother nature though will be a challenge. Many growers planted into dust and hoped for normal rain patterns to kick-in. Instead, however, the rains have started about three weeks later than normal and arrive as soil temperatures have dropped enough to make vigorous germination and reliable establishment more difficult.

## Today

The Pacific Northwest has enjoyed a very extended warm and dry summer this year. It's been great for outdoor activities, but not so great for farming or air quality. Rain has finally arrived to help the crops and put an end to lingering wildfires.

Many herbicide, insecticide and fertilizer applications were postponed since rain is necessary to incorporate them into the soil. In some cases this has meant higher levels of insect damage. It also means that herbicide applications are likely to be reduced to two instead of three. On a positive note, dry conditions haven't yet spurred a lot of weeds to germinate either. Vole pressure is reported as very high in some areas, low in others.

### Here are additional comments specific to individual crops:

**Perennial ryegrass:** Perennial ryegrass yields were mixed with some growers reporting yields a bit below their long-term average. Conversely, many farms had results significantly above average. High prices last year pushed many fields into less than optimal (weedy) conditions. Much of that production has yet to be conditioned.

Planting of new fields is still ongoing and ryegrass does fine with later plantings so the dry conditions will not have much of a negative effect on yield. The negative side of the dry fall is the lack of a "sprout" of weed seed ahead of planting. Growers usually are able to spray-out whatever weeds have germinated ahead of planting the new crop.

**Annual ryegrass:** The annual ryegrass crop was mixed this year with yield reports ranging from a bit low to quite good in some areas. Bushel weights were heavy.

Seed companies have reduced the number of contracted annual ryegrass acres this fall. However, much of the annual ryegrass ground is not suitable for other crops so many of those acres will grow open-market annual in 2023.

## Looking Forward

Growers are already being advised to watch carefully those new fields that are not yet established and be ready to take them out next spring in favor of reseeding. This could be the same crop or they could switch to a spring seeded crop like spring wheat or radish. Established fields are showing mixed results. Some show reasonable post-harvest recovery, but others (often older fields) are still dry and brown. In some cases they will recover too late and come out in the spring.

**Tall fescue:** Of the major crops, tall fescue was the most disappointing. Poor yields are mostly thought to be the fault of cool, wet conditions that caused a very long pollination window. A long flowering period means a long ripening period resulting in no real "right-time" to harvest.

Planting this fall was difficult, especially without irrigation. Growers who planted on time into dust and did not irrigate will have a long winter wondering if there will be enough growth to make a crop. Many of these fields will come out in spring.

Of concern to all is the lack of recovery and fall growth in all of the fescues (tall and fine). These species initiate seed tillers in the fall and require vernalization over the winter to produce seed. Lack of fall growth is likely to limit seed production next year.

**Fine fescue:** The fine fescue crop was below average. Lack of field burning the past two years has hurt yields. A wet spring/early summer created optimism as the plants looked healthy. This was a prime example of how vigorous vegetative growth does not always transfer into good seed yield.

Existing fields are looking rough and drought-stressed. Fine fescue is typically planted in hills and on fairly shallow soils. Acres of fine fescue remain limited as growers opt for other crops.

**Creeping bentgrass:** Yields of creeping bentgrass were average. This crop is the last grass seed crop that is harvested and it's always a challenge to get new seed to market in time. Harvest occurring two to three weeks late this year made it even more difficult.

Growers typically do not irrigate these fields after harvest, so they are relieved to finally have some rain and some time for a little re-growth before it gets colder.

**Kentucky bluegrass:** Kentucky bluegrass is all produced in areas outside of the Willamette Valley. Results were average to strong depending on the area. Irrigated fields were average and the dryland areas had good yields thanks to higher than normal spring rain. Acreage was up a bit in some areas, but down sharply in central Oregon due to very restricted irrigation allotments.

Plantings this fall were restricted by the very late harvest of preceding crops. Fields that did get planted established well. Existing stands were slow to recover due to late arriving rain.

**Poa trivialis:** Yields were average. New seedlings and existing stands look good going into winter. Acres are still very restricted.

**Orchardgrass:** Yields were well below normal. Orchardgrass is the first of our seed crops to ripen and the extended, late spring caused poor seed-set. Orchardgrass acres continue to decline.

**Bermudagrass:** There is a small amount of this warm season grass produced in Oregon. It's a very late crop in the state and yields were not as affected by the late spring and were average. Moving forward there may be increased pressure to produce more bermudagrass here. The traditional production area in southern California and Arizona is dependent on water from the drought stricken Colorado River. Irrigation allocations are causing changes in long range cropping plans. This will mean restricted production of warm-season

grass seed caused by the same conditions that are increasing demand.

**Red clover:** Not a lot of this crop has been cleaned yet, but yields seem to be average to just above. New fields have yet to germinate and will struggle to establish if temperatures drop as expected.

**White clover:** 2022 white clover yields were average. Growers are cleaning faster than usual to try to capitalize on a strong market. Existing fields have been slow to recover due to the dry conditions and new seedlings will be small going into winter making them more susceptible to frost heaving and slug damage.

**Crimson clover:** The wet spring caused heavy pressure from Sclerotinia (crown rot and wilt) in crimson clover this year. Yields were good where growers managed to keep it in check and much lower where they didn't. Crimson is planted as a beneficial rotation crop so acres are expected to be up for 2023.

**Radish:** Radish yields this year were surprisingly close to average. It's an early crop that once it germinates wants average to high temperatures

in a sprint to make seed. With the wet spring, most fields sprouted and then just stayed small, but many made a surprising amount of seed. The outlook for 2023 is for acres to increase and help fill grass acres that are coming out.

**Hazelnuts:** Global conditions caused the Oregon hazelnut price to plummet this year. Adjusted for inflation this year's price is the lowest since they price tracking started in 1984. Not surprisingly, this has stopped hazelnut acres from increasing for the first time in several years. Some growers are choosing to take out old stands.

**Wheat:** Wheat acres in the valley will also increase this year and help fill the void left by diminishing grass seed acres. The price is not great, but it's better than break-even and it's a crop that can help growers with cash flow. The group discussed the possibility of 80,000 acres or more in the valley. This creates problems because the infrastructure to handle wheat in the valley has diminished greatly.



A field is cultivated in hope of rain on October 18th



Drill rows in an annual ryegrass field that had yet to sprout on October 26th