BARNYARDS & BACKYARDS

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

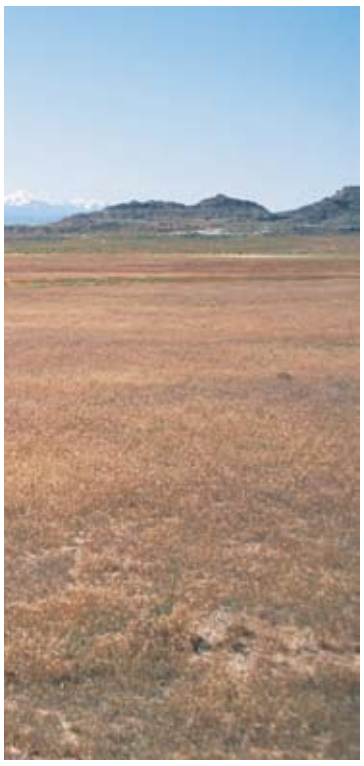
UW Cooperative Extension Service @ Profitable & Sustainable Agricultural Systems

Cheatgrass cheats producers out of productive range

By Michael Smith

Downy brome, also known as cheatgrass, is a widespread, exotic, and invasive winter annual grass in much of western North America.

Cheatgrass reduces productivity and diversity of desirable plants. In the Great Basin, cheatgrass-fueled wildfires convert many native grasses and sagebrush areas to cheatgrass-dominated landscapes. In Wyoming, resource managers are concerned that loss of critical sage grouse and other wildlife habitat and secondary weed invasions such as rush skeletonweed and medusahead may occur.



Cheatgrass is not new to Wyoming. Herbarium records indicate cheatgrass in much of the state by the early 20th century. The biology of cheatgrass and other invasive winter annual bromes in relation to Wyoming's climate may limit their spread.

Annual bromes have primarily evolved in Eurasian climates characterized by wet, mild winters, and hot, dry summers. Cheatgrass can survive continuous years of drought and may grow vigorously following drought. Wyoming's elevation and location within the continent tends to produce a climate that deters extensive degradation of native plant communities by cheatgrass. Cheatgrass is found in low abundance but, on specific sites under favorable conditions, can become a problem.

In general, low fall precipitation and spring precipitation favors perennial grasses and limits fall-germinating cheatgrass and its spring growth potential. Cheatgrass sites tend to have low perennial grass cover and have experienced fire or soil disturbance, or have shallow soils.

Cheatgrass at higher altitudes may be found on south- and southwest-facing slopes where early fall snowmelt provides moisture for germination, and spring snowmelt occurs before perennial plants begin growth. Roadsides, recent stream deposition, and recently burned juniper or sagebrush stands frequently have cheatgrass. Following disturbances, cheatgrass declines because perennials compete well for spring precipitation.

In eastern Wyoming, cheatgrass and Japanese brome are usually present because of warmer fall and early spring temperatures at lower elevations and greater fall precipitation. Spring precipitation can result in a bumper crop. Fortunately, the coincidence of temperatures and precipitation do not result in sufficient cheatgrass to reduce perennial grass in most years. Japanese brome may be the prevalent annual species in undisturbed, native plant communities.

To manage or avoid cheatgrass, minimize soil-disturbing activities that impact perennial grasses. Where possible, quickly establish good perennial grass cover on areas of heavy disturbance such as roads, pipelines, winter feeding areas, and

permanent livestock water sources. Short duration, high intensity grazing is most detrimental to cheatgrass when it is near flowering to the soft dough stage of seed set.

Cheatgrass will continue to occur across the state in varying degrees. Producers should avoid becoming complacent because unique precipitation patterns, disturbance, inappropriate management, and specific soil and topographic situations will result in abundant cheatgrass. Weather adverse to cheatgrass and good grazing management should limit cheatgrass to local situations. Where needed, herbicides may be applied to reduce cheatgrass infestations to aid in the germination of residual perennial grasses or reduce competition if pastures are to be reseeded.

Michael Smith is a professor and rangeland management extension specialist in the Department of Renewable Resources in the University of Wyoming's College of Agriculture. He can be reached at (307) 766-2337 or pearl@uwyo.edu.

Insurance options provide protection for alfalfa seed growers

By James Sedman and John Hewlett

Alfalfa for seed can be a high-value cash crop for Wyoming. It can also be an extremely risky crop to grow.

Producers should consider developing a sound plan to protect themselves from price, production, and other forms of risk where possible. Crop insurance through the pilot Forage Seed Crop Insurance Program developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Risk Management Agency (RMA) may be an option to protect against unexpected declines in revenue caused by production losses.

Program Outline

Alfalfa for seed may be insured under Federal Crop Insurance Corporation programs in two Wyoming counties for 2006 – Park and Big Horn. There are several provisions for this program. Alfalfa for seed must be "certified" with the Wyoming Seed Certification Service or grown under a forage seed contract to qualify for an alfalfa seed policy.

It must not be planted within any other crop such as oats or grasses. The seed crop stand count must meet program and stand age requirements. The crop must also be harvested in a timely manner, as indemnities will not be paid from losses due to untimely harvest.

Alfalfa seed policies typically cover losses due to weather such as hail or drought, and wildlife or insect damage. A policy will also cover losses due to failure of irrigation water supplies if caused by a named peril that occurs during the insurance period.

How It Works

Alfalfa seed policies are basically a multi-peril insurance contract (MPCI). This yield-based insurance utilizes a producer's actual production history (APH) to determine an average yield and is used as a basis for insurance coverage. If a producer does not have enough production history to calculate an APH yield, one will be assigned using a county transitional yield or "T" yield.

To obtain a policy, the producer must submit an application before September 30. The producer must first determine the acres and insure them as either basic units or optional units. Note that alfalfa seed is the only crop insurance program to offer optional units by variety,

and there are specific record-keeping requirements where optional units are selected.

For seed under contract, the price is based on either the price per pound stated in the forage seed contract or the established price set by RMA. The seed producer also selects the price election percentage coverage level ranging from 50 to 75 percent of the approved APH yield level in the policy. Producers may also seek to minimize their premium costs by insuring against losses less than 50 percent of approved yield by purchasing a catastrophic coverage for $100 per crop per county.

How Indemnities are Paid

Indemnities are paid when a substantial yield loss occurs. Producers should report any such losses to their agent immediately to determine the indemnity payment.

For example, suppose a producer insures 100 acres of alfalfa for seed that meets the age and stand density requirements. The price election of 95 percent equates to a price of $1.20 per pound. The APH yield for this stand is 500 pounds per acre, yielding 50,000 total pounds of seed. The coverage level is 75 percent, meaning that losses under 37,500 pounds will be covered. A substantial yield loss would occur where the producer only harvests 15,000 pounds of seed. This means 22,500 pounds are covered at $1.20 per pound, which results in a total payment of $27,000.

This example demonstrates how insurance coverage can be a vital part of covering costs in the event of a substantial yield loss. Premium costs will vary with the policy and area, so consult a crop insurance agent for more information.

For a listing of insurance agents, contact a local USDA Farm Service Agency office or the RMA Web site at www.rma.usda.gov. For more information about this and other risk management topics on the Web, consult the Western Risk Management Library at http://agecon.uwyo.edu/riskmgt.

James Sedman is a consultant to the UW College of Agriculture's Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, and John Hewlett is a farm and ranch management specialist in the department.