

FIELDS OF FEW DREAMS

STATEWIDE What will prices be at harvest this year? "That's literally the million dollar question," says Tammy Dennee, executive director of the Oregon Wheat Growers League. Many commodity prices have plunged since the recession began, others are flat, and there's not much optimism in the fields these days.

According to Brent Searle, economist at the Oregon Department of Agriculture, Oregon grows more than 220 commodities, with 40 of them grossing more than \$10 million each per year.

"Different commodities are being affected in different ways," Searle says. "Almost all of them are either flat or down right now."

Grass seed, Oregon's second-most-valuable crop, is down because sales are tied to housing developments and golf courses. Both have drastically cut back on seeding.

Hop farmers also are facing a bleak market.

"Right now you can't give a hop away,"

says John Annen of Annen Brothers hop farm in Mt. Angel. "Nobody is buying right now. There is no market."

Annen Brothers locked in their prices early by negotiating contracts with brewers to avoid selling their hops on the market.

And last year's optimism in the wheat industry has evaporated. Farmers planted 90,000 fewer acres of wheat in 2009 than in 2008, in what Bruce Eklund, deputy director of the National Agriculture Statistic Service's Oregon Field Office, calls a "nationwide phenomenon."

The average price of wheat in 2008 was \$6.50 a bushel, down \$1.73 from 2007's average. A bushel currently sells for \$5.40, 10 cents below the break-even mark.

Blackberries are one commodity that could potentially see an improvement in sales. The demand is up and the stock of frozen blackberries is low, but so is investor confidence. "Buyers are hesitant because they don't know where the market will go," says Searle.

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