

*ODA inspectors audit three nurseries as part of a pilot project for exporting to Canada*

## **Oregon a testing ground for nursery certification program**

**February 7, 2007...** It may be the wave of the future for those nurseries wanting to export their product. Oregon's largest agricultural sector is participating in a pilot program that changes the way the Oregon Department of Agriculture's nursery inspectors do their job, ultimately making it easier to ship plant material to Canada and perhaps other countries in the future. Three Oregon nurseries are voluntarily part of the U.S. Nursery Certification Program (USNCP) and a fourth is expected to enter the program this year. Oregon is the first state to test this alternative program. Other states plan to follow.

"This program differs from our traditional inspection process in that we do not end up inspecting the nursery product as it sits on the loading dock as we have in the past," says Gary McAninch, supervisor of ODA's Nursery and Christmas Tree Program. "Now, we look at the processes that nurseries use to ensure there are no pests or diseases on that nursery stock."

This "systems approach" to inspection and certification requires participating nurseries to develop and implement specific pest management practices to mitigate against the risk of pests and diseases that could be shipped along with plant material. Essentially, the nursery puts together its own inspection program that emphasizes various points during the production cycle. Nursery personnel are trained to do self-inspections. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) has developed the program's standards. ODA and USDA inspectors conduct five annual audit inspections. Four involve actual inspection of the plants during the growing season. The fifth audit involves looking at the documentation to ensure nurseries are sticking to their mitigation plan.

"Instead of looking as the plants are being loaded onto the truck, we are looking at the nursery's practices and certifying them," says McAninch. "This allows the nursery to essentially ship when it wants to. The nursery does not have to schedule an inspection with us, and wait for our inspector to look at the plants and issue a phytosanitary certificate. The certificate would already be issued. They can load the truck when they need to. It could be midnight Saturday, and they can ship the plants at that time."

Currently, the USNCP process can only be used for plants exported to Canada. Nursery stock shipped to other countries requires the traditional visual inspection by ODA before a federal phytosanitary certificate is issued. Canada itself uses the same type of program for its nursery stock being exported to the United States. USDA is limiting the number of Oregon nurseries participating in the USNCP program to four. More nurseries may be added once the program is evaluated."

"Oregon nurseries do not have to be part of USNCP to ship to Canada," says McAninch. "Our inspectors will still go out and certify plant material using the old inspection process before it is shipped."

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For the three Oregon nurseries participating in USNCP, the program appears to be well accepted. Two large nurseries— Monrovia and Bailey— ship as many as 350 truckloads of plant material to Canada each year. They can benefit from the flexibility USNCP allows to line up the trucks when needed. The third nursery— Northwest Shade Trees of Brooks— doesn't match the volume of exports of the other two, but is just as interested.

"All two dozen or so employees in our nursery are now part of the team that looks at the product," says Mac McCarter, general manager of Northwest Shade Trees. "We now have two dozen or so pairs of eyes to catch any problems our plants may have out in the field. If we bring in clean, inspected material from the field, it should be clean when it is ready to ship. This program is taking nursery production to another level."

Product quality, not just convenience, is also a major goal of the big nurseries participating in the alternative inspection program. By having documented procedures through the entire process of growing, handling, and shipping, a cleaner plant is produced and the chance of spreading pests and diseases is reduced.

"Bailey Nurseries, Inc. has always taken pride in producing a high quality nursery product," says Cathy Caldwell of Bailey Nurseries, based in Yamhill. "This program helps us facilitate better communications, and heightens awareness within and between the different departments of our operation. This pilot program is building the foundation for improved plant health and will reduce the spread of pests and diseases."

ODA uses 13 geographically-assigned horticulturists to inspect nearly 2,000 Oregon nurseries involved in growing and shipping plant material. The inspectors write the all-important phytosanitary certificates assuring out-of-state as well as international customers that the plants are pest and disease-free. During this time of year, the busy shipping season, inspectors can write as many as 100 certificates in a week. If adopted on a larger basis, the USNCP may allow some flexibility in an inspector's schedule.

"Overall, this program could make it a bit easier for us," says ODA horticulturist Bev Clark. "It puts more of the onus on the nursery to do its own inspections. That helps us during the super busy shipping season."

Since USNCP is still a pilot program, it is hard to say whether it truly makes it easier for ODA inspectors or if the program produces a cleaner nursery product. It would be difficult to improve on Oregon's sterling reputation for producing clean plant material. But if other countries demand the systems approach to inspection used by USNCP, then those Oregon nurseries interested in exporting will need to meet those requirements.

"This could be a benefit to nurseries, even if they weren't shipping across international borders," says McAninch. "It may give them a marketing advantage. They could certainly toot their horn that they are in this program and let people know that they go through some additional processes with their plant production cycles to ensure they are pest and disease free."

It will be up to USDA-APHIS to decide the ultimate fate of the alternative program. But the early returns look promising, and Oregon's \$877 million nursery industry is poised to benefit from the process.

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