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OSU Seed Lab Busy as Oregon Farmers Harvest 2007 Grass Seed Crop

By Bryan Andersen, 541-737-9180

Sources: Adriel Garay, 541-737-4464; William C. Young III, 541-737-5859

CORVALLIS, Ore. – Millions of bags of Oregon grass seed will be shipped around the world this year, and many of them will be bearing a blue tag issued by the Oregon State University Seed Certification Service.

The blue tag assures buyers of the authenticity and quality of the seeds, verified by tests conducted by the OSU Seed Laboratory.

"This is a crucial time of the year for grass seed cleaners, growers and shippers," said Adriel Garay, the seed lab manager. "They need their seed tested and tagged in time for the fall planting season."

In response, the OSU Seed Lab is hard at work testing and reporting on this year's crop of grass seed.

The Seed Lab, part of the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences, tests up to 14,000 samples each year for seed purity and germination rates, according to Garay. About 60 percent of those samples are grass seed processed from mid-July through September.

To assure quality and meet the demands of a global market, the seed lab must evaluate samples as quickly as possible. Germination testing poses challenges as the seeds are still overcoming their natural dormancy. And testing of physical purity poses additional challenges because grass seeds are small and some impurities resemble the crop seed.

To be certified, a seed sample must be from 95 to 98 percent free of impurities such as weed seeds, stems or debris, depending on the kind of seed tested. Germination rate requirements range from 75 to 90 percent, also depending on the crop kind, according to Garay.

Those are minimum requirements, Garay said, but most samples exceed the minimum.

"Oregon grass seed typically germinates at rates of up to 95 percent, which is excellent for any seed," Garay pointed out. "That is why it is recognized as the best grass seed in the world."

Oregon is the world's No. 1 grass seed producer, supplying nearly 60 percent of all commercial grass seed, according to William Young, an OSU Extension agronomist.

And the industry is increasing. Last year growers produced 789 million pounds of Oregon grass seed worth \$454 million, according to Young. That was up from 720 million pounds valued at \$348 million in 2005.

Oregon growers produce grass seed for lawns and for forage. Exported throughout the world, Oregon grass seed is in high demand for golf courses on the East Coast and for pastures in Texas and the Gulf Coast states, Young said.

The OSU Seed Lab tests more than 200 different kinds seed products – representing about 14,000 samples – in more than 30,000 different tests in a year.

"We test everything from field crops like wheat, barely and oats, to trees and vegetable seeds," Garay said. "In the past few years we've seen an increase in requests to test native grasses and shrubs. This is a reflection of our state's broad agricultural and climatic diversity."

Established in 1909, the OSU Seed Laboratory is one of the oldest and largest in the United States. It is self-funding, supporting itself through constant innovations and fees it charges for its testing services. For more information, see: <http://www.seedlab.oscs.orst.edu/>

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About the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences: The college contributes in many ways to the economic and environmental sustainability of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. The college's faculty are leaders in agriculture and food systems, natural resources management, life sciences and rural economic development research.