

'Perfect storm' pushes onion prices below costs

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

NYSSA, Ore. — U.S. onion prices have plummeted significantly from last year's levels.

"The open market prices right now are below the cost of production. It's making it pretty tough for growers right now," said Oregon farmer Reid Saito.

Jumbo yellows are going for about \$5 per 50-pound bag now, compared with \$12 last year, said Kay Riley, manager of Snake River Produce in Nysa. Medium yellows are fetching between \$3.50-\$4 per bag, compared with \$10 last year.

"Demand has been a little on the lackluster side for about eight or nine months now," Ri-



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Onions are harvested in a field near Nampa, Idaho, in September. Onion prices have fallen significantly from last year's levels and are below the cost of production for many growers.

ley said.

Owyhee Produce General Manager Shay Myers said prices, on a per bag unit, are 20 to 30 percent below normal.

"These prices we're seeing

are definitely below the cost of production," he said. "There's just no money to be made off of onions right now."

The price decline is the result of several negative factors,

Myers said, including limited exports to Pacific Rim and Central American countries, where a lot of U.S. onions traditionally end up.

"They're still being shipped to those countries but at a much, much slower pace," he said.

Asian countries have an ample supply of onions this year and are importing less from the United States. When there are opportunities to export onions to those nations, it's difficult to get them shipped because of the West Coast port slowdown, Myers said.

The Russian embargo on certain agricultural commodities is also a major factor, he added. Onions from the U.S. are not on the list of banned

items, but onions from Europe are and a lot of those onions are ending up in nations that typically import a lot of U.S. onions.

Central American countries that are usually major customers of U.S. onions "are flooded with Dutch and Spanish onions right now," Myers said.

The Treasure Valley area of Idaho and Eastern Oregon typically produces 1 billion pounds of yellow, red and white bulb onions a year, about 25 percent of the nation's supply.

Plantings in the region were up 8 percent this year, Myers said. "Eight percent of 1 billion pounds ends up being a whole lot of extra onions."

Freight rates are up 27 per-

cent over last year on a cost-per-unit basis, Myers said, and just finding enough trucks has been a problem as well, Saito said.

Myers said all those factors have added up to a perfect storm when it comes to onion prices.

"It's a multitude of factors that have come together at the same time," he said. "Considering all those negative things that are happening right now, I'm glad to be where we're at."

Saito said growers are hoping things turn around in 2015.

"2015 is a new year and growers around here are pretty resilient," he said. "I think the majority of them will find a way to make it through this."

ODA hopes bird flu cooped up

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A bird flu outbreak that has barred U.S. poultry from some overseas markets has apparently been contained to one southern Oregon backyard flock, Oregon Department of Agriculture spokesman Bruce Pokamey said Dec. 30.

"We feel very good. Nothing has spread from that site," he said. "We're pretty confident any danger of spreading from the original premises is over."

A contagious and lethal avian influenza strain was confirmed Dec. 19 in a 100-bird flock in Winston in Douglas County. The highly pathogenic H5N8 virus killed 20 guinea fowl and two chickens.

It was the first outbreak of highly pathogenic bird flu in U.S. poultry in a decade and came three days after the virus was confirmed in a wild duck and captive falcon in Washington.

Although the virus has not appeared in commercial flocks, several countries have restricted U.S. poultry imports.

"It's been a catastrophe — that one backyard flock," USA Poultry & Egg Export Council President Jim Sumner said Dec. 31. "It's cost us a few hundred million dollars."

Pokamey said the other birds in the Winston flock were euthanized, and the premises have been disinfected.

The owner had not been moving birds off his property, Pokamey said. "He wasn't introducing the birds to anywhere else."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture will continue checking other backyard flocks in the area for several more weeks, according to USDA spokeswoman Jolene Hayden.

South Korea, Thailand, South Africa and Russia have banned U.S. poultry and poultry products from their countries. Canada, Japan and Singapore have imposed restrictions on Oregon poultry. Hong Kong



Stephen R Ausmus/USDA-ARS

Chickens are raised in an indoor facility in this file photo. A bird flu outbreak that has barred U.S. poultry from some overseas markets has apparently been contained to one southern Oregon backyard flock, ODA officials say.

banned poultry and poultry products specifically from Douglas County.

Sumner said other countries have halted issuing import permits, effectively banning U.S. poultry.

South Korea alone imported U.S. raw poultry products worth \$78 million between January and September of this year, according to the export council.

The USDA issued a statement Dec. 30 accusing countries of overreacting and ignoring "sound science."

"Unfortunately, some countries have decided to place far more restrictive measures than necessary on U.S. poultry, including, in a few instances, bans on imports of all U.S. poultry and poultry products," the USDA stated. "We disagree with these actions and are taking a number of steps to address

them and help support the U.S. poultry industry."

Avian influenza has not caused human health problems in the U.S. Health officials say infected birds are safe to consume if properly cooked.

Even if the outbreak is contained, there may be more trade restrictions coming, and bans could be in place for several months, Sumner said. "Some countries look for an excuse to stick it to us," he said.

To guard against further outbreaks, agriculture officials have been urging backyard flock owners to keep wild birds away from their poultry.

The Winston guinea fowl and chickens ranged free outdoors on property with a pond and marsh. Officials suspect the domestic birds contracted the virus from migratory waterfowl.

A northern pintail duck

found dead in December at Wiser Lake in Whatcom County in northwest Washington tested positive for highly pathogenic H5N2. A captive gyrfalcon fed wild duck shot at the same lake died and tested positive for highly pathogenic H5N8.

Washington Fish and Wildlife waterfowl section manager Don Kraege said more than 200 wild birds have been tested since then, but none had bird flu.

Officials plan to continue testing migrating waterfowl in northwest and southwest Washington for a few more weeks. The birds have largely stopped for the winter and won't range far unless pushed south by harsh weather, Kraege said.

"We just have to wait and see the results from this to see where we go next," he said.

Wild birds commonly carry avian influenza, but it's rarely fatal to them. Even the wild duck that had the highly pathogenic virus, died of another disease.

Low pathogenic bird flu, less contagious and less deadly to poultry, is more common but still inspires trade restrictions.

New highly pathogenic bird flu cases continue to break out in Asia and Europe.

On Dec. 29, a Japanese broiler breeder farm reported a high mortality rate. Authorities quickly identified highly pathogenic H5N8 as the cause. Some 37,000 chickens were destroyed, according to the World Organization for Animal Health.

Other countries reporting highly pathogenic bird flu outbreaks this month are Italy, Vietnam, Russia, the United Kingdom, Germany, India and Canada.

Highly pathogenic H5N2, which shares gene segments with H5N8, has claimed 245,600 birds at 11 British Columbia commercial poultry farms in December. In addition, an 85-bird noncommercial flock of ducks, chickens, geese and turkeys was infected. The last outbreak was reported Dec. 19.

Bird flu strikes backyard flock in Washington

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A second Northwest backyard flock has been infected with highly pathogenic avian influenza.

The birds' owner contacted the Washington Department of Agriculture after about 50 birds in a 150-bird flock of chickens, turkeys and domestic waterfowl in Benton County in south-central Washington state died in the last week.

WSDA said Jan. 2 that Washington State University's Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory in Pullman confirmed that highly pathogenic H5 bird flu had infected the flock.

Samples were sent Jan. 2 to a U.S. Department of Agriculture laboratory in Ames, Iowa, for more tests to pinpoint the type of virus, WSDA spokesman Hector Castro said.

The infection is likely to be another setback for the U.S. poultry industry.

Several countries banned U.S. poultry and poultry products after a 100-bird backyard flock in Douglas County in southern Oregon was struck with bird flu in December.

Also in mid-December, a wild northern pintail duck and a captive gyrfalcon fed wild duck were found to have had highly pathogenic bird flu in Whatcom County in Washington.

No U.S. commercial flocks have been infected. USDA has characterized bans on U.S. poultry as an overreaction since avian influenza does not affect poultry meat or eggs, which remain safe to eat.

Like the Oregon flock, the

backyard flock near Benton City, west of the Tri-Cities, had access to the outdoors. The premises include a pond used by migratory waterfowl. Officials suspect the wild birds spread the virus to domestic birds.

"The presence of the virus in migratory waterfowl is a risk to backyard poultry. One step owners should take is preventing contact between their birds and wild birds," State Veterinarian Joe Baker said in a written statement.

Castro said WSDA is working with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to contain the virus.

Deaths or illness among domestic birds should be reported to the WSDA Avian Health Program at 1-800-606-3056. For wild birds, contact the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife at 1-800-606-8768.

Highly pathogenic H5N2 bird flu claimed some 245,600 birds at 11 commercial poultry farms in British Columbia, Canada, between Dec. 1 and Dec. 17. An 85-bird backyard flock in the same area was reported infected Dec. 19.

Highly pathogenic H5N8, related to the H5N2 strain, appeared in several Asian and European countries in November and December as migratory waterfowl that breed in Alaska and northeast Asia moved south.

According to the World Organization for Animal Health, no humans have been infected. But the organization cautioned authorities to be on the alert because avian influenza strains mutate.

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Please obtain the full requirements for proposals at www.odessapda.com or by calling 509-982-7850 or by email at info@odessapda.com. Odessa Public Development Authority. **Clark Kagele, President**

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2-2/#7

Report: Bees need feed, humans need education

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A new state report stresses restoring habitat, rather than

restricting pesticides, as the best way to help honeybees in Washington.

"If you want to help bees, plant flowers," said Washington State University Island County Extension Director Tim Lawrence, a bee researcher and member of the Honey Bee Work Group. "We need acres and acres of flowers."

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SECRETARY OF STATE NOTICE OF TEMPORARY RULEMAKING

Oregon Department of Agriculture, Food Safety & Animal Health Program, Administrative Rules Chapter #603, Sue Gooch, Rules Coordinator, (503) 986-4583.

Adopt: 603-011-0800, 603-011-0810, 603-011-0820, 603-011-0830, 603-011-0840

RULE SUMMARY: These rules establish an emergency quarantine in Douglas County, Oregon prohibiting the movement of poultry or poultry products into or out of Douglas County without a permit obtained from the USDA Animal Plant Health Inspection Service. A quarantine is necessary to prevent the spread of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N8, the spread of which could seriously prejudice the public health or welfare of the State of Oregon and pose a severe threat to the animal health of the United States. Rule to be effective December 30, 2014 through June 27, 2015.

The Legislature set up the 12-member group amid concern that pests, chemicals and development are making honeybees fewer and weaker.

The panel has come back with a host of policy recommendations, many related to promoting bee-friendly practices among farmers and weed-control boards.

"It's going to involve huge amounts of coordination," said Ephrata commercial beekeeper Tim Hiatt, another work group member. "We're looking for a beekeeping industry that is stable and growing."

The report doesn't attempt to assess the health of honeybee colonies or whether bee populations are declining. The report does identify several threats and singles out para-

sitic Varroa mites as the single biggest problem for U.S. bee hives since 1987.

More specifically to Washington, other problems include losing rural land, indiscriminate noxious weed control and farming practices that reduce plant diversity, according to the report.

"Popular concerns about honeybees often seem to focus on singular issues and a desire for simple solutions," the report states. "However, the challenges beekeepers face are part of a broad and complex picture."

The report cites pesticide misuse as another threat, but the group rejected banning neonicotinoids, pesticides restricted by Europe and local jurisdictions such as Seattle, Spokane and Thurston County.

"The evidence doesn't support that it's going to do any good," Lawrence said. "Most of what we can do about pesticides is education."

The report cites development as the state's population grows as a fundamental problem. Also, agriculture practices such as monoculture, cutting alfalfa before flowers bloom and removing hedgerows reduce bee forage, according to the report.

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