



Sean Ellis/Capital Press File

Hops are processed at a facility in southwestern Idaho last September. As the region's economy booms, many farming operations are having a harder time finding and keeping workers.

## SW Idaho farmers struggle with tight labor market

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

NAMPA, Idaho — As the economy in southwestern Idaho continues to heat up, farming operations are having a harder time finding laborers, and they also have to pay more to keep them.

"The market for skilled ag labor is very, very tight," said Don Tolmie, production manager for Treasure Valley Seed Co. in Homedale. "It's hard to find enough people to fill all the rosters right now."

According to the Idaho Department of Labor, the unemployment rate in southwestern Idaho was a combined 3.1 percent in May. In Ada County, the state's most populous, it was 2.7 percent.

That means farming and ranching operations have a harder time finding workers who can often make more money in other sectors.

Meridian farmer Richard Durrant has had to bump up his pay rates over the past two years to attract and keep workers. Despite that, his operation has still lost some employees who have left for better pay.

"Every day I'm talking to producers who can't find enough employees," he said. "Every grower I talk to says the labor force is definitely tight and it's hard to find people willing to work."

Winery and vineyard owner Ron Bitner of Caldwell also had to increase his pay rates last year to keep employees from leaving. He hasn't had to do that again this year but only because a harsh winter severely damaged his wine grape crop and he hasn't had to do much trimming.

But he has had to increase the total hours of his current employees to get by this year.

Others have had to increase hours as well as pay.

"Wages are up and hours are longer," Tolmie said.

Farmers told Capital Press that a thriving construction industry in the region is their main competition.

According to the Department of Labor, the average annual wage for 6,914 people employed in the agricultural industry in southwestern Idaho in 2016 was \$31,248. That's compared to \$43,928 for the 20,104 people employed in the construction industry last year.

The labor crunch has been particularly difficult for the region's labor-intensive fruit industry. Two of the three largest fruit orchards in the state turned to the H-2A guest-worker visa program for the first time last year to ensure they had enough workers.

The other, Williamson Orchards and Vineyards, seriously considered using the H-2A program this year but opted not to mainly because its wine grape crop was severely impacted by the unusually cold winter.

There are a lot of overhead expenses involved in the guestworker program, said owner Michael Williamson.

With the expected reduction in the operation's wine grape crop, "I had a hard time penciling it out," Williamson said of the H-2A program.

Williamson said he had to bump up his regular workers' pay to get them to stick around and the H-2A program is still on the table for future years.

"You have to be able to harvest your crop," he said. "At some point, that may override everything."

# Trust between state, ranchers elusive as wolves move into N. California

By TIM HEARDEN  
Capital Press

HAT CREEK, Calif. — More than five years after a gray wolf first set foot in California, trust between state wildlife managers and ranchers remains elusive.

That much was certain at a workshop on wolf-livestock conflicts June 14, as state Department of Fish and Wildlife officials were grilled by cattle producers who perceive the agency as slow to notify landowners of nearby wolf sightings.

"We are right now concerned about, one, minimizing livestock losses and two, protecting wolves," DFW wildlife program manager Karen Kovacs told about 60 area ranchers in the fire hall at Hat Creek, about 70 miles northeast of Redding.

If the state issues information about pups, for instance, some wolf enthusiasts and videographers might flock to the area to get pictures, while others might want to harm them, Kovacs said.

"They're in the middle," she said of wildlife managers. "We try to contact people when



Photos by Tim Hearden/Capital Press

From left, Kent Landon of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife talks as Elizabeth Willey of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pete Figura of the state DFW, Paul Kjos of Shasta County and Jim Shuler of USDA Wildlife Services listen. They participated in a panel discussion on wolves June 14 in Hat Creek, Calif.

we've got multiple tracks."

When Kovacs later urged the ranchers to "trust us," several blurted out, "Well, you don't trust us."

"You can't believe a word the California Department of Fish and (Wildlife) says," Lassen County rancher Joe Egen said in an interview. "They are intentionally vague with all of this. There's a pair right now on one of our allotments. We've

seen the tracks.

"We didn't decide until three days ago whether we were going to turn out or not," he said, adding that he will run his cattle on his summer allotment but with a large human presence.

The exchanges highlight what has been a rocky relationship between state regulators and rural Northern Californians since the December 2011 arriv-



Pamela Flick, the California representative of Defenders of Wildlife, talks about efforts to reach common ground on a stakeholders' committee that helped put together the state's wolf management plan.

al of OR-7, the first known gray wolf in the state in 87 years.

Since then, the state Fish and Game Commission has listed wolves as endangered, meaning the animal can't be killed or hunted even in cases of livestock depredation. The state in December finalized its wolf management plan to guide conservation and management efforts as a wolf population takes hold.

The California Cattlemen's Association and California

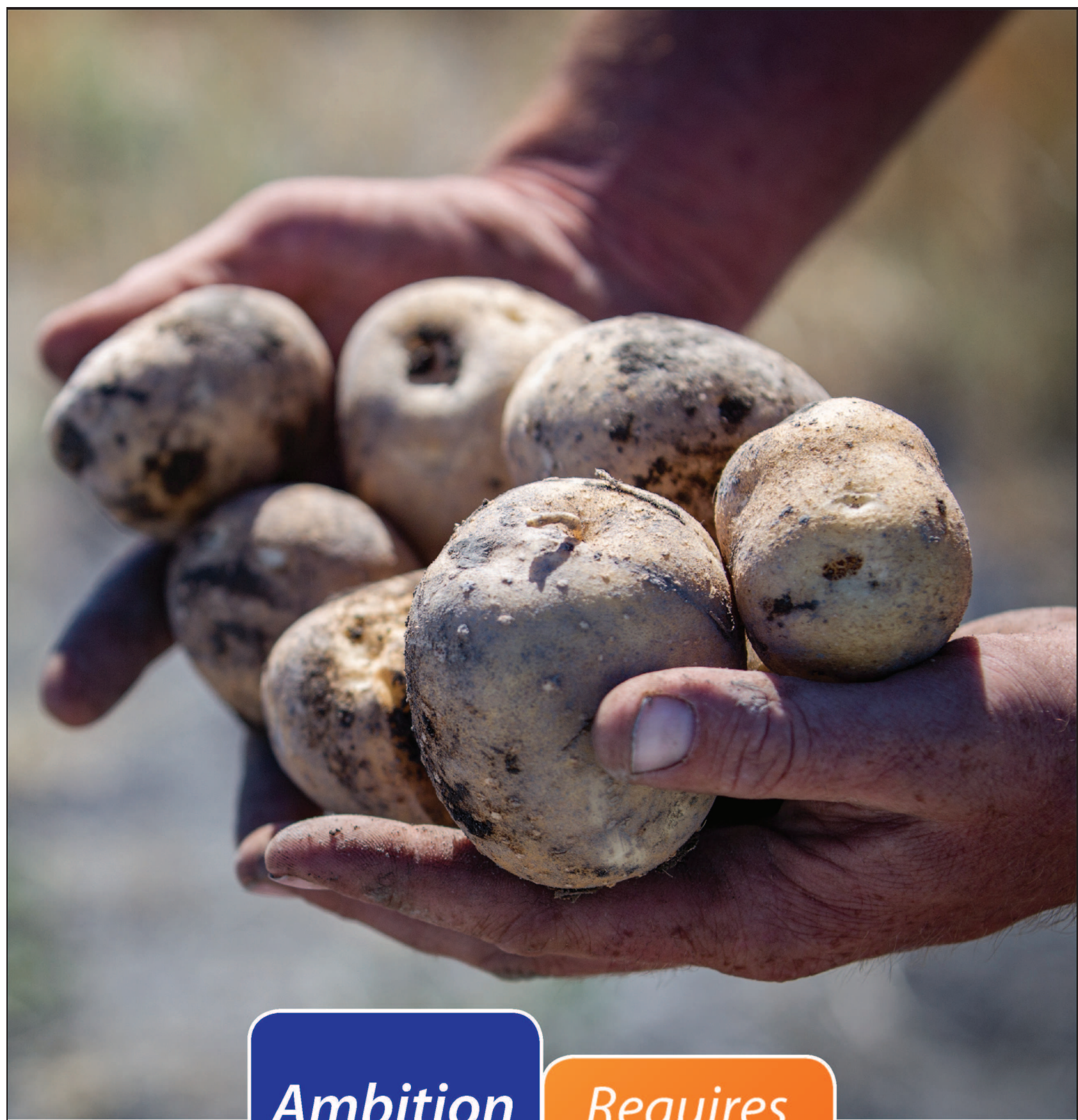
Farm Bureau Federation filed suit against the state earlier this year to challenge the listing. Meanwhile, OR-7 has returned to Oregon, but another pack — the Shasta Pack — has become established in Northern California.

Wolf advocates and state officials have been promoting nonlethal means of warding off wolves, including using guard dogs, motion-sensor lights, brightly colored flags or range riders. But cattle and sheep producers say state officials are frequently vague about where they believe wolves to be.

Rancher and Shasta County Supervisor Mary Rickert said state officials should collar wolves so that landowners can know when their animals may be in danger from nearby predators.

"As long as the government can be diligent about notifying us, then it will work," she said in an interview.

The use of collars were one idea that enjoyed nearly unanimous agreement in a stakeholders' group that helped put the state's wolf management plan together, said Pamela Flick, the California representative for Defenders of Wildlife.



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