

Trees

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south to California.

Rising prices

Wholesale growers estimate they're raising prices at least 10 percent year-over-year. Growers don't expect normal harvest levels for Christmas trees to return until at least 2021 or 2025.

Like Hupp Farms in Oregon, Barr Evergreens in North Carolina can fulfill wholesale orders for its existing customers but has to turn away new ones, said owner Rusty Barr.

Barr expects to raise prices \$2 to \$3 for pre-cut Fraser fir trees at his retail outfit. That's on top of the \$60 to \$80 they've sold for in the past, depending on size.

North Carolina harvested an estimated 3.5 million trees in 2016, according to the Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association. The state was followed by Michigan (3 million), Pennsylvania (2.3 million) and Washington (1.5 million).

By contrast, Oregon cut down approximately 5.2 million trees.

For Oregon growers, popular Noble firs are especially lucrative — but they only grow so fast, often spending nine years in the ground to grow to 6 feet in the Pacific Northwest.

"That's the Cadillac of the industry," said Bob Schaefer, general manager of Noble Mountain Tree Farm. The Salem, Oregon, area wholesaler is massive, usually harvesting about half a million trees a year from the more than 4,000 acres the company grows on in the Willamette Valley.

One of the factors driving the shortage was a practically nonexistent crop of Noble fir cones for 15 years, with a good crop finally returning in 2016, Schaefer said. Without cones, there're no seedlings and no trees.

Limited supplies of the Noble fir seedlings led Noble Mountain to fill production holes with Douglas firs, assuming customers would still want a Christmas tree of some sort. But some buyers aren't eager to branch out.



A helicopter piloted by Terry Harchenko with Industrial Aviation Services, Inc., drops off a bundle of Christmas trees during a harvest at Hupp Farms.

MOLLY J. SMITH / STATESMAN JOURNAL

"There's a lot of pent-up demand for Noble fir that, you know, probably, to some extent, won't be met this year," Schaefer said.

He expects Noble fir harvest levels to return to normal in 2025 or 2026.

California is Noble Mountain's biggest customer, but the company sends trees elsewhere in the U.S., and even down to Mexico, where the market is hot for its abundance of Douglas firs.

"This year, we're shipping more to Mexico than we've ever shipped before," Schaefer said.

Opioids

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"He was your neighbor," she said. "He was my neighbor."

He was prescribed Vicodin after getting into a car crash and became addicted to the painkiller. When his doctor cut him off, he began robbing pharmacies.

"That was how I knew that we had an opioid problem in Marion County," she said.

Story all too common

Marion County Sheriff Jason Myers said 15 years ago, he would rarely see heroin in the community.

"Now, I could tell you of pastors, of student-athletes, of next-door neighbors who ended up in the same place as this Grandpa Bandit," he said.

Clarkson and Myers spoke before a crowd at the Salem City Club Friday. The event, titled "America's Opiate Epidemic: Is it in Salem and what's being done about it?", proved to be timely.

Only a day earlier, President Donald Trump declared the opioid epidemic a public health emergency.

The epidemic claimed 64,000 American lives in 2016, hitting both rural and urban areas, killing the rich and the poor, Trump said.

Related spikes in crime

For years, prosecutors and officers in Oregon heard horror stories from their East Coast colleagues, Clarkson said. They learned about cities in Pennsylvania reporting 35 drug-related deaths in one week and of am-

balance crews in New Jersey struggling to keep up with overdose calls.

"This is a cautionary tale for us," she said.

The once rare heroin-related calls now have become more commonplace in Marion County.

Clarkson said they are seeing more overdoses, more prescription medicine abuse and more reports of fentanyl-laced drugs.

"We know it's coming," she said. "We know the patterns are there."

It is up to leaders, law enforcement and the community to decide how to fight the epidemic, Clarkson added.

Spikes in violent crimes like homicide and robbery tend to follow spikes in drug addiction, as do increases in property crimes. Myers said addicts will often commit identity theft, burglaries and theft to fund their drug habits.

"We know this could bring a criminal crisis," Clarkson said.

In the past, the tough-on-crime "War on Drugs" approach would often lead to jail time and felony convictions for those struggling with addictions.

She said using the criminal justice system to treat a public health problem like addiction has proven to be expensive and ineffective.

"What we've learned — and it's taken us a little bit of time in law enforcement — is that we can't arrest our way out of homelessness, we can't arrest our way out of mental illness and we can't arrest our way out of addiction," Myers said.

A new approach

Public safety is the top priority for prosecutors and law enforcement. Criminal convictions are often the best option for keeping communities safe and holding

Not worried about the competition

Even as shortages affect the Pacific Northwest, competitors in North Carolina don't keep Schaefer up at night.

For starters, cross-country freight prices tend to keep the competition at bay. "I won't say it's prohibitive, but it pretty much prices their product out of the realm of reason for the consumer in most cases," he said.

Barr, the North Carolina wholesaler, agrees. With freight costs, "it's getting pricey to go to Denver," he said.

There's also a rule of thumb among Christmas tree farmers: West Coast trees remain west of the Mississippi, and East Coast trees stay east of the river. Scattered exceptions crop up, such as when wholesalers compete for Lone Star State customers.

"We kind of bash heads in Texas," Schaefer said.

Fending off fake trees

Shortages and rising prices are fueling concerns among growers that customers will turn to artificial trees, whose shelf lives long outlast those of their natural competitors.

Oregon growers sold 4.7 million real trees in 2015, falling more than a quarter from sales five years earlier, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Artificial trees accounted for nearly 81 million of Christmas trees displayed in the U.S. in 2016, while nearly 19 million were real, according to estimates from the nonprofit American Christmas Tree Association.

With a dramatic shortage that's not expected to reverse for another six or eight years — if not longer — Hupp, in Oregon, is worried customers will buy artificial because they can't find the real thing.

"Their families will get used to that being the norm," he said.

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Officials: Sea lion disease outbreak could spread to dogs

TRACY LOEW STATESMAN JOURNAL

Oregon officials are warning coast visitors to keep their dogs away from dead or stranded sea lions, which have been washing up in increasing numbers due to a leptospirosis outbreak.

"Over the past few months, we have been getting calls for multiple sick or dead sea lions daily, which is higher than normal," said Jim Rice, a researcher at Oregon State University's Marine Mammal Institute.

At least eight cases of leptospirosis have been confirmed through OSU's Oregon Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory since the outbreak began in late September, mostly on beaches in Lincoln, Tillamook and Clatsop counties.


The disease also has struck sea lions in California. Leptospirosis occurs worldwide, but outbreaks occur only sporadically in marine mammals. The last Oregon outbreak was in 2010.

The disease can spread through contact with urine or other bodily fluids of an infected animal. There is a small risk of transmission to people, but dogs are most at risk of coming into contact with body fluid from sick or dead sea lions. The bacteria can also sicken livestock and other wildlife.

Leptospirosis can cause severe disease in dogs, State Veterinarian Emilio DeBess said. Symptoms include kidney failure, fever, weakness and muscle pain. "If your dog becomes ill after being exposed to sick or dead sea lions, contact your veterinarian immediately," DeBess said. A vaccine for dogs also is available.

Officials are asking people who observe sick sea lions or other marine mammals on the beach should to at least 50 feet away and report them to the Oregon State Police at 1-800-452-7888.

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At least eight cases of leptospirosis in sea lions have been confirmed through OSU's Oregon Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory since the outbreak's start in late September.

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