

Demand high for record blueberry crop

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

PASCO, Wash. — Washington will harvest a record 110 million pounds of blueberries this season surpassing Georgia as top producer.

But the real story is Washington is barely keeping up with demand, Alan Schreiber, administrator of the Washington State Blueberry Commission in Pasco, said.

“Demand for blueberries is stunningly high. Right now if you wanted to buy processed Washington blueberries, you can’t. We’re all sold out and we have been since January and February,” Schreiber said.

A USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service report shows 134 million pounds of frozen blueberries and juice in cold storage at the end of April, but Schreiber said almost all of that has been sold and is just being held until it is used.

“There is no oversupply of blueberries in the U.S.,” he said.

A majority of the 2015 Washington processed crop is spoken for, he said.

By processed he means mainly frozen for ice cream, pastries, and mixed frozen berries, for all kinds of uses. Processed, about 70 percent



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Blueberries at Blueberry Hills Farms, Manson, Wash., June 18. Washington expects to harvest 110 million pounds of blueberries this year, making it No. 1 in the nation.

of Washington’s crop, also means dried and juice concentrate. Thirty percent of the crop is sold in the fresh market.

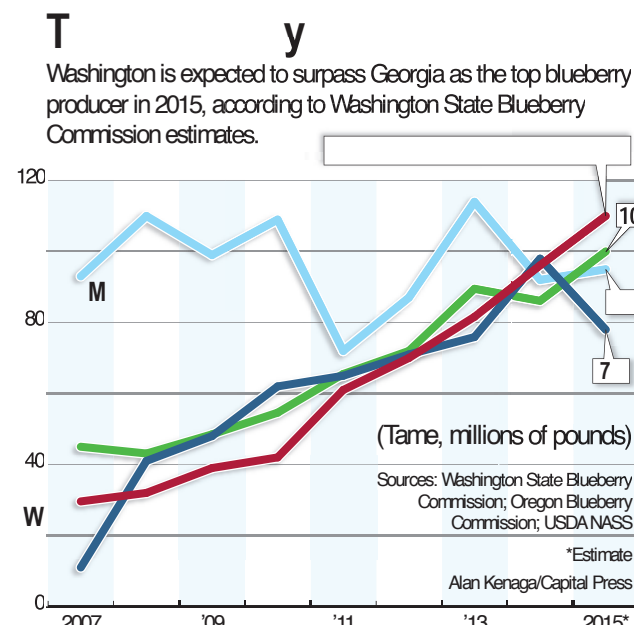
“I talked to a rep of a large Eastern Washington organic grower. They are picking now. They said demand is high, the price is high and people are screaming for organic blueberries for processing,” Schreiber said on June 17.

The price is \$2 per pound, he said. Last year, Washing-

ton’s fresh price averaged \$1.84 per pound and processed, 96 cents per pound, according to USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Consumer awareness of health benefits of blueberries is driving demand, Schreiber said. Blueberries are a good source of dietary fiber and vitamin C and are high in antioxidants which protect against cancer, heart disease and other age-related diseases.

Washington has 13,000 acres in production with 2,500 organic. It has increased production 10 years in a row and



produced 96 million pounds in 2014 valued at \$120.5 million. There are 175 growers in a dozen counties on both sides of the state.

Georgia grew 98 million pounds worth \$109.8 million in 2014. Oregon was 86 mil-

lion pounds at \$106.7 million. Other top producing states are Michigan, California, New Jersey and North Carolina.

Georgia’s crop this year is forecast at 78 million pounds and Michigan, 95 million to 100 million pounds, Schreiber said.

Prop. 2 blamed for decline in egg production in California

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Minimum cage sizes under Proposition 2 have led to fewer hens laying fewer eggs in California, according to industry representatives.

Poultry farmers in the Golden State produced 311 million eggs in April, down 9 million from March and a decrease of 78 million from April 2014, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported.

The production decline comes as an average of 13.2 million egg-layers were on hand in California in April, compared to nearly 16.8 million in the same month last year, according to the USDA’s Pacific Region Poultry Report. The state had 17.6 million egg-laying chickens in 2013, the National Agricultural Statistics Service reported.

Rather than spending millions of dollars to build new facilities, many farmers are raising fewer birds in their existing structures to comply with the minimum cage requirements under Proposition 2, which voters passed in 2008.

“Less hens, more space,” said Debbie Murdock, executive director of the Pacific Egg and Poultry Association.

The drop in production is a key factor as prices in the Golden State have soared well above \$3 per carton for larg-



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

A dozen large Grade AA eggs fill a carton. Egg production has declined in California as producers comply with new cage requirements under Proposition 2.

er eggs, although prices have stabilized and even dropped slightly last week, according to the USDA’s shell egg market report. The benchmark price for small eggs was \$2.63 as of June 12.

Prices for shell eggs have risen nationwide because of the deadly outbreak of avian influenza in the U.S., which has shuttered farms in 15 states and led to blanket bans on American poultry products in China and South Korea.

The estimated price for a dozen large Grade A eggs rose to \$1.66 nationally in June, a 30-cent increase, according to a USDA supply and demand forecast. The agency predicts nationwide average prices may get as high as \$1.87 per dozen by the fourth quarter.

In California, the drought is also taking a toll on everyone — from commercial producers to youngsters bringing chickens to local fairs. Michael Willis, a 4-H member from Happy Valley, Calif., said his family has already faced fines for using too much water.

“It’s been really difficult,” Willis said while showing his poultry project at the Shasta District Fair in Anderson, Calif. “When you fill up their water and run the hose, you have to wait until the water gets cold.”

But farmers mostly blame the drop in production on the requirement that each egg-laying hen have 116 square inches in a cage to spread its wings. The Humane Society of the United States-sponsored initiative banned so-called battery cages as well as veal crates and gestation crates for pigs.

All shell eggs sold in the state must meet the standard set by Proposition 2, regardless of where they were produced. HSUS argues the law sparked a national movement to improve conditions for laying hens, noting that other states including Oregon and Washington are phasing out smaller cages and food service companies such as Burger King and Starbucks are going cage-free in their supply chains.

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