

# Packers assess damage in massive Wenatchee wildfire

By DAN WHEAT  
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Two tree fruit packing companies continue to assess their damages and plan the upcoming pear and apple packing season one week after the Sleepy Hollow Fire destroyed much of their facilities.

Damage to the businesses and dozens of homes that were destroyed by the fire probably exceeds \$100 million, said Rich Magnussen, a specialist at the emergency management unit of the Chelan County Sheriff's Office.

Blue Bird Inc.'s packing plant was "pretty much destroyed," and Stemilt Growers LLC's building was "heavily destroyed" but some of its packing line is salvageable, Magnussen said.

Northwest Wholesale Inc. lost four or five buildings and a lot of product and Michelsen Packaging Co. lost all of its outside storage of apple trays, pads and pallets, he said.



Firefighters douse the roof of the Stemilt Growers LLC pear and cherry packing line facilities in Wenatchee, Wash., on June 29. The roof was close to collapsing, fire officials said.

Sheriff's office detectives and the state Department of Natural Resources are investigating the cause of the fire. Natural causes have been ruled out, Magnussen said. Detectives are seeking the public's help in identifying anyone near the start of the fire or connected with a white Toyota pickup seen traveling westbound at or near the time the fire began,

the sheriff's office said in a news release.

The fire was reported at 2:15 p.m. on June 28. It began along Sleepy Hollow Road just northwest of Sleepy Hollow Heights subdivision on the south side of the Wenatchee River, Magnussen said. One barn and an outbuilding burned in Sleepy Hollow Heights but no homes, he said.

Wind pushed the fire two miles southeast into Wenatchee, destroying 30 homes. More than 20 of them were in the upscale Broadview subdivision and the rest were near it, he said. Several were million-dollar homes, he said. Upper management of tree fruit companies Stemilt, Columbia Marketing International, Oneonta Starr Ranch Growers and Crunch

Pak all reportedly lost homes in Broadview. Hundreds of homes were evacuated.

Embers blew over a wide portion of town to the industrial section, igniting Michelsen and the other warehouses. A heavy rain shower the next morning helped knock down the wildland portion of the fire, Magnussen said. In all, about 3,000 acres burned, mostly steep, grassy hillsides west of town.

The Stemilt plant burned throughout June 29. State Department of Ecology personnel worked closely with firefighters regarding chemicals. Methyl bromide was moved out of Blue Bird ahead of the fire and cylinders of it were buried in sand at Stemilt to prevent rupture, Magnussen said.

Methyl bromide is used to fumigate cherries to kill codling moth before export to Japan.

Burning chicken manure fertilizer at Northwest Wholesale created a foul smell but

was not dangerous, he said. An ammonia leak caused a one-hour shelter-in-place alert for part of the town downwind of the fire the morning of June 29. Confluence Health Center set up an ammonia decontamination station but there were no injuries, he said.

Stemilt is still assessing its damage but much of its pear packing line appears to be functional, said Roger Pepperl, marketing director. The company probably won't release dollar estimates of damage, he said. The facilities are insured.

At the time Stemilt unveiled the new pear packing line in September 2008, Pepperl said it cost \$7 million. A Rainier cherry line in the same facility, damaged in the fire, was installed for \$1.5 million in 2003.

Blue Bird Inc., a Peshastin fruit cooperative, still estimates loss of its fully insured Wenatchee facility at \$30 million, said Ron Gonsalves, general manager.



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Malt barley grows in Idaho Falls.

## Barley states respond to Idaho's invitation to cooperate

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — Major barley-producing states are responding favorably to the Idaho Barley Commission's invitation to work closely on important issues that affect growers in all the states.

"We've had some excellent responses," IBC Administrator Kelly Olson said about a letter the commission sent to other states. "It has yielded a lot of new engagement."

Idaho is the nation's top barley-producing state.

The letter invited the states to work together on research and market development issues and asked for input "on ideas and strategies that you believe will help our specialty grain industry zero in on untapped opportunities and tackle rising challenges."

According to the letter, some of the Idaho barley industry's priorities include "investing in more collaborative research across state lines" and "ensuring a more competitive transportation infrastructure to move barley and malt more competitively to markets across the country and in neighboring markets in Latin America."

Idaho's industry also sees an opportunity to cooperate on "diversifying market channels for barley, particularly in the largely untapped domestic human food market."

"We look forward to work-

ing with you on these and other opportunities that will help boost barley production in the U.S.," the letter concludes.

In response, Washington Grain Commission CEO Glen Squires sent the IBC an email that said his group "is encouraged by the opportunities to collaborate, specifically in the area of barley research. We look forward to engaging in a strategy on how we can work together to maximize efficiencies for barley."

"We look forward to working with the Idaho crew," stated an email response from Marv Zutz, executive director of the Minnesota Barley Research Promotion Council.

Barley is a relatively small crop and it makes sense to combine efforts on projects that will benefit growers in all the states, said East Idaho farmer Scott Brown, who spearheaded the IBC's outreach effort.

"We want to take all of our resources, combine them and spend time working together instead of individually," he said. The states "do work on a lot of the same things. If it's a problem in Montana and North Dakota, it's probably a problem in Idaho."

Olson said the outreach effort is a priority for the IBC and has resulted in particular in a lot of new engagement with Montana, which borders Idaho and shares a lot of the same barley cropping and rotation practices.

## Nine-day heat wave finally breaks in Treasure Valley

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

Treasure Valley farmers say their crops suffered some heat stress during a brutal nine-day heat wave but for the most part made it through OK.

Researchers and growers are concerned the prolonged stretch of hot days will lead to higher insect and disease pressure.

"The more heat units you have, you have more generations of insects and diseases," said Saad Hafez, professor of nematology at the University of Idaho's Parma research station. "We expect (we're) going to see a lot of diseases and insects."

Stuart Reitz, an Oregon State University cropping systems extension agent in Ontario, Ore.,

said there is significant concern about spider mites, which proliferate in hot, dry conditions and affect several crops grown in the region.

The high temperatures in Boise and in Ontario topped 100 degrees for nine straight days through July 4 and several records were set during that stretch.

The nine-day streak of 100-degree temperatures was a record in Boise, matching the previous record set in 2006 and 2003.

On July 5, the high temperature in Ontario only reached 95 and the forecast for the region has highs mostly in the low to mid-90s for the rest of the week.

"We've had a lot of heat for a long time," said Nyssa, Ore., farmer Paul Skeen. "The heat's tough on everything, including

the people out working in it. This cool-down, if you can call it that, will help quite a bit."

The tips of some onions in the valley are burned on the end of the leaves, which is a sign of heat stress, said Reitz.

But other than that, "the crops (in the valley) made it through better than I anticipated," Skeen said.

According to Clint Shock, director of OSU's Malheur County experiment station, the growing degree day index — an accumulation of heat used to predict when crops will bloom and mature — is at a record level.

There were 1,718 growing degree days from Jan. 1-July 5, far more than the typical 1,300 or fewer that could be expected by now during an average year,

Shock said.

Farmers said the unusually warm year has resulted in crops at a growth stage far ahead of normal. Skeen began harvesting wheat on June 30.

"That's absolutely unheard of around here," he said.

Middleton, Idaho, farmer Sid Freeman said he was detasseling corn on July 4 for the first time ever.

"Some farmers have corn that is 8, 9 or 10 feet high. Unbelievable," he said. "The biggest thing we're seeing from the heat right now is that the growth stage for crops is way ahead of where we normally are. Corn, sugar beets, everything is ahead of normal. There's never been anything like this year."

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