

Sudden freeze decimates cherry crop

Milton-Freewater orchard will need two seasons to recover

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

MILTON-FREEWATER, Ore. — Vern Rodighiero had no idea what was coming.

A year ago in November, temperatures around Milton-Freewater plummeted by nearly 60 degrees in a matter of days, dealing a sudden massive blow to the valley’s signature fruit crops.

Rodighiero, who farms several hundred acres of orchards, lost all his cherries and good amount of prunes and plums. Apples fared better, though many trees were killed all the way down to the roots.

“Nobody expected this,” said Rodighiero, surveying the damage from his truck. “We’ll just have to rebuild. A lot of areas will have to start over.”

Cherries were especially hard-hit by the disastrous 2014 freeze. Not a single cherry was harvested commercially in Milton-Freewater, and it could take several years for buds to blossom again.

Milton-Freewater grow-



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

Milton-Freewater, Ore., cherry farmer Mick Oliver looks at cherry buds on a sweetheart cherry tree in one of his older orchards. He believes that the trees will produce fruit next year despite last November’s hard freeze.

ers don’t plant many acres in cherries — just 650 total — but the fruit typically blooms about a month earlier than Oregon’s highest producing region around The Dalles, which allows local cherries to fetch a premium price.

Clive Kaiser, extension horticulturist for Oregon State University, said the crop usually brings in about \$4.5 million at the farm gate, which was all lost this year due to Mother Nature.

“This was probably the

most devastating freeze I’ve ever seen,” Kaiser said.

The problem was just how quickly the cold snap set in. Fruit trees typically go through a gradual process of dormancy heading to winter, when shorter days and cooler weather signal them to shed their leaves and draw nutrients back in from their branches.

But if extreme cold happens before the trees can acclimate to conditions, water will freeze inside the plant’s cells,

killing buds overnight and, in some cases, the entire tree.

That’s what happened last November, Kaiser said, leaving cherry orchards decimated. He figures any tree younger than three years old likely didn’t survive, and those that did will take at least several years to grow new branches and fruiting spores.

Kaiser doesn’t expect a full cherry harvest until 2017, at the earliest.

“For the growers, this is still taking its toll,” he said.



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group
Cherry buds develop on a Chelan cherry tree in a 6-year-old orchard northwest of Milton-Freewater.

“I think some guys are still in denial.”

Apples did a better job withstanding the cold, but are still predicted to be down about 20 percent. Umatilla County grows more apples than anywhere else in Oregon, with 2,500 acres yielding roughly 10 tons per acre.

Mick Oliver, who farms roughly 60 acres of apples and cherries north of town, said he plans to replant one 10-acre block of Skylar Rae and Chelan cherries next spring — so long as the trees at the nursery are in stock.

Even that won’t be easy. Nursery trees in Wenatchee, Washington won’t be available for at least 2-3 years, according to Kaiser, due to the high amount of damage across the region.

Oliver is optimistic he will be able to pick at least some cherries next year, after waiting to prune the damaged

wood off his surviving trees. Since his orchards have a higher density of trees, he said it is worth it for him to harvest even a partial crop.

“You’re going to take a hit, but it’s just how you play the game,” he said.

Milton-Freewater suffered a similar freeze in 2010, and Kaiser thinks atypical seasons like this could become normal for the area.

“If I were a farmer, I’d be concerned about it,” he said. “Every year, there seems to be challenges.”

Oliver said he’s preparing to not be caught off guard again. He plans to shut off his irrigation later this month, which will artificially start the hardening process.

And, though it might have a negative effect on next year’s fruit, he said it’s better than risk losing entire orchards.

“You never have to go to Vegas, because you’re gambling every damn day growing cherries,” he said with a smile.

Rodighiero said farmers will lean on crop insurance and federal assistance to help carry them through this year, but there’s a lot of work left to do.

“Each one of these orchards is going to take a lot of man-hours,” he said. “It’s a disaster, we know that. It’s something you live with and try to do the best you can.”



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Chelan FFA Members Successful at NCW District Fair

Thirty-two Chelan FFA members picked up where they left off last year with a phenomenal success rate at the NCW District Fair in Waterville, Wash.

First, all animals were judged for their market readiness, quality, and conformation. In the swine barn 15 members brought pigs and at the finals 7 of the 12 market hogs brought back for the final drive were from Chelan with Owen Oules earning the Grand Champion Market Hog Banner and Rosette. Jake Horlebien brought two steers to the Beef Barn and earned the Reserve Champion Banner and Rosette on market day for his 1,380-lb. Angus steer. In the Sheep Barn, 7 members brought lambs and at the final drive 9 of the 12 lambs were from Chelan. Jessie Oules made it 3 fairs in a row with the Grand Champion FFA Market Lamb.

Twelve members brought meat goats and 11 of the 12 goats in the finals were exhibited by the Chelan Chapter. Bobby Hanson made it back to the winners circle with the Reserve Grand Champion Meat Goat. Dianna Sanchez had the Grand Champion Nubian Doe and Zoee Stamps had the Grand Champion Halter Horse, as well.

In the Still Life Barn, starting in the Home Produced Products division: Bobby Hanson had the Grand Champion Eggs, Sarah Goynne had the Grand Champion Art Project. Amanda Reeves received both the Grand and Reserve Champion ribbons in Ornamental Horticulture for her floral arrangements. Jessie Oules was Grand and Tiffini Hawkins Reserve in the Agronomy Plant Mount Division. Bobby Hanson had the Grand Champion Hay Exhibit and was also the Reserve Champion Overall Horticulture.



The Chelan FFA all dressed up on Sale Day at the NCW District Fair in Waterville, Wash.

Stephanie Olivera had the Grand Champion Horticulture Exhibit and Bobby Hanson was Reserve. Ty Miller had the Grand Champion Agriculture Mechanics exhibit and Bobby Hanson had the Reserve Champion exhibit.

On contest day in the Swine Fitting and Showing, Chelan had 8 members in the finals and 3 of the final 4 with Katie Gleasman winning the Reserve Champion Swine Fitting and Showing Rosette. Jake Horlebien won the Reserve Champion Beef Fitting and Showing Rosette and both he and Katie did a nice job in the Round Robin. Zoee Stamps also earned a Reserve Champion Rosette in Western Pleasure.

Chelan members won the Livestock Judging CDE with Luke Gleasman placing third and Dane Schwartz, Bobby Hanson, and Amanda Reeves placing 7th, 8th, and 9th respectively. Chelan members earned the second place banner in Produce Judging with Aislinn Davis placing 10th overall. Chelan was also second in Tractor Driving with Michael Tutino, Luke Gleasman, and Jake Horlebien placing 5th, 6th, and 9th respectively.

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