

Strong cranberry crop coincides with Wisconsin's down year

Cranberry production down, consumption up

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Strong Northwest harvests and a sub-par crop in Wisconsin may boost Washington and Oregon cranberry growers.

The harvest in Wisconsin, by far the top cranberry state, will be below expectations, holding down total global production, according to Ocean Spray, which takes in more than half the world's commercially grown cranberries.

U.S. cranberry growers are struggling with a huge surplus driven primarily by large Badger State crops and increasing production in Canada and Chile.

A serious supply-and-demand imbalance remains, even though cranberry consumption has increased 8 percent in the past year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service.

Average prices farmers receive have been roughly halved since peaking in 2008.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Guillermina Hernandez pushes cranberries toward a conveyor Sept. 23 during a harvest on the Long Beach Peninsula in Washington. Washington and Oregon are producing strong harvests, though global production is expected to be down. The combination may help Northwest growers struggling with low prices.

"With the anticipated smaller industry crop, we do not expect inventories to increase this year, particularly in light of the strong demand we have seen over the past few years," Ocean Spray spokeswoman Sarah Gianti said Tuesday in an email.

The Massachusetts-based

cooperative, which many Washington and Oregon growers belong to, projected in October that the global crop would reach 12 million barrels, which would top the record 11.94 million barrels harvested in 2013.

With the harvest nearly over, Ocean Spray forecasts

the crop will fall short of the 2013 mark and be less than the 11.81 million barrels reaped last year. One barrel equals 100 pounds.

Wisconsin was projected to produce about 5 million barrels, but winter damage and a May frost lowered yields, said Tom Lochner, executive di-

rector of the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association. "I've been hearing that it's at least a firm 10 percent down," he said.

Meanwhile, Northwest cranberry growers enjoyed an unusually warm growing season. "This is the best crop we've ever had," said Long Beach, Wash., cranberry grower Malcolm McPhail.

"It's pretty much true for our area here," he said. "It's just kind of a remarkable year."

Washington State University horticulturist Kim Patten, who works with cranberry growers in both states, said per-acre yields are high, rivaling levels typical for Wisconsin but rarer in the Northwest. "If we can do that, we can compete," he said. "We're all excited Wisconsin has an off-crop this year."

Gianti said smaller crops are expected in New Jersey and Quebec, Canada. Massachusetts and British Columbia, Canada, are expected to have strong crops, she said.

Ocean Spray took in 430,000 barrels from Chile in June, almost a record. The cooperative began taking ber-

ries from the South American country in 2012.

While foreign production has increased in the past several years, so has U.S. production. The cranberry inventory before this fall's harvest began was 9.1 million barrels, according to the federal Cranberry Marketing Committee. In a September market outlook, the USDA's Economic Research Service said another large crop likely will put more downward pressure on prices. The cranberry industry reduced surpluses in 2001 and 2002 with federally approved volume controls. The USDA this year rejected a request from the industry to order production cutbacks, saying it was concerned U.S. growers were conspiring with Canadian growers to limit supply.

Lochner said he doubts volume controls can be used again. "If Canada doesn't agree to limit harvests, it's going to be very difficult for U.S. growers to say, 'We're going to cut back production,'" he said.

The USDA has supported the industry by buying large amounts of cranberries for schools and food banks.

Truffles, 'Idaho's other tuber,' start appearing

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

EAGLE, Idaho — A tinge of excitement is running through the handful of farmers in this area who are trying to grow what they call "Idaho's other tuber."

Paul Beckman, the first person to plant truffle-inoculated trees in Idaho, found 3 pounds of the expensive fungi this spring.

"I found one about the size of a tennis ball. I don't know what that means, but I know I was happy," said Beckman, who has planted about 35 acres of truffle-inoculated trees in the foothills north of Eagle.

Eight other people have planted about 40 more acres in the Treasure Valley of Southwestern Idaho.

Those other truffle growers planted their trees after Beckman and are hoping his success is an indication they will also start finding truffles. Beckman has been finding a handful of truffles in his orchards for two years.

The truffles Beckman found this year are known as Italian spring white truffles. He and other Idaho truffle farmers will take their dogs out into their orchards again beginning in December to look for French winter black truffles.

He hopes the dogs will sniff out some black truffles this winter.

"We'll start taking the dogs up there a little bit later this year and see if there's anything there," said Brad Sprenger, whose 10 acres of trees were planted three years after those of Beckman, his neighbor.

Truffles are a fungus that never emerges through the soil and grow near the root systems of several tree species. The fungus, which feeds off the tree's nutrients, fetch between \$400 and \$1,000 a pound.

It typically takes eight to 12 years for truffle-inoculated



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Paul Beckman, with the help of dogs trained to sniff out truffles, looks for truffles in his orchard north of Eagle, Idaho, in this August 2013 photo. He didn't find any of the expensive fungus on this hunt but he did find 3 pounds of truffles this year.

trees to start producing the tuber-like fungus.

The bulk of Beckman's trees are in their seventh year and while Bitner Winery owner Ron Bitner's trees are a year behind, he's cautiously hopeful he will start finding his own soon.

Bitner, a major player in Idaho's wine industry, which is centered in the Treasure Valley area, said the truffle experiment is part of a larger goal to turn the area into a culinary destination.

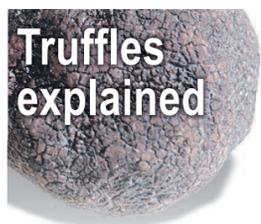
"We're hoping by next year we'll start finding some," he said. "It would be fun to some day be able to take people out truffle hunting."

Because it takes eight to 12 years for trees to start producing truffles, people who want to grow them need a tremendous amount of patience, Beckman said.

But truffle growers in this area expect their orchards to eventually produce between 10-30 pounds an acre, and with truffles selling for hundreds of dollars per pound, the payoff could be significant.

"It just takes patience but I think we'll all be extremely happy some day," Beckman said.

In the meantime, some



Truffles are ... Hypogeous (underground) versions of mushrooms. They are the "fruit" of a fungus *Ascomycota* of the genus *Tuber*.

Appearance: They resemble small potatoes, ranging in size from that of a marble to a golf ball or larger.

Biology: The fungi of all truffles form symbiotic relationships with trees, exchanging nutrients and water for sugars from the host plant.

Types: While there are hundreds of different kinds, only a few are sought after as a delicacy.

How to find them: Almost anywhere there are trees; truffles occur at the interface between organic litter and the soil. Truffles emit a strong scent as they mature. Pigs and dogs have been used for centuries to detect them.

Photo courtesy of wikipedia.org
Source: North American Truffling Society

Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

truffle growers have started experimenting with planting other crops between the rows of truffle trees, Beckman said.

"It will be interesting to see how that evolves," he said. "It could give people who plant truffles another (revenue) option."

Tree fruit plants rebuilding after fires

\$150 million in facilities, equipment lost in disasters

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Three tree fruit companies are in varying stages of rebuilding about \$150 million worth of storage and packing facilities and equipment destroyed by wildfires last summer in Wenatchee and Chelan.

Blue Bird Inc.

Blue Bird, a Peshastin fruit cooperative, has started foundation work to replace 110,000 square feet of warehouse on Walla Walla Avenue in Wenatchee that housed three cherry packing lines and an organic apple packing line — all destroyed June 28 by a wind-driven wildfire. About 120,000 square feet of controlled atmosphere and refrigerated fruit storage was saved but needed repairs from smoke and water damage.

Total loss was \$45 million and was fully covered by insurance with no expense to the 190 grower-members, said Ron Gonsalves, Blue Bird general manager.

The loss included a new \$11 million, 28-lane, high-tech MAF Industries cherry line that had been in operation just 30 days, \$4.5 million worth of cherries and about 18,000 boxes of organic apples.

Some 300 cherry packers saw their seasonal jobs end early when packing was switched to Monson Fruit Co. in Selah.

Organic apple packing shifted to Blue Bird's home plant in Peshastin. Three packing lines there will run day and night all winter instead of just days with four weeks of nights in the fall, Gonsalves said.

Blue Bird has moved aggressively on reconstruction of its Wenatchee plant. Demolition finished at the end of Sep-

tember. Foundations and underground services are going in and "our hope is to be standing walls by the first week of December," Gonsalves said.

The roof will be on and the building enclosed by mid-January and a new, 42-lane cherry line with three MAF optical sizer-sorters will be ready by mid-May for the start of the cherry season, he said.

An eight-lane organic apple line with an upgraded MAF optical sizer-sorter and automated bagging is scheduled for completion by mid-August in time for the 2016 apple harvest.

Stemilt Growers LLC

Near the Blue Bird plant, Stemilt Growers lost two Rainier cherry lines and sustained damage to its pear packing line in its North Miller Street plant.

The company will not disclose the dollar or square footage losses and is still assessing the pear line with an insurance company, said Roger Pepperl, Stemilt marketing director. He would not say whether the facility is totaled, how much is covered by insurance and whether it will be rebuilt.

About a month ago, Stemilt began building a replacement high-tech Rainier cherry packing line at its main Olds Station plant in Wenatchee, Pepperl said. He would not disclose the cost but said it will be operational for the 2016 cherry season.

Stemilt modernized a mothballed pear packing line at its former Dovex facility on Euclid Avenue in Olds Station and is packing pears there and storing them there and nearby at the main Olds Station plant.

"We will make some further investment in pears, but right now we're packing at Euclid," Pepperl said.

Stemilt has been able to handle all of its storage and packing needs from the fire at other company plants. It helps, he said, that this fall's industrywide apple crop is about 25 million boxes — or 19 percent — smaller than last fall's.

Employees were moved to other plants but not laid off because of the fire, he said.

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Chelan Fruit Co-op

Forty miles north of Wenatchee, Chelan Fruit Cooperative plans to replace by Sept. 1, 2016, \$80 million worth of equipment and facilities that were destroyed in an Aug. 14 wildfire.

"It was a terrible disaster that we're turning to an opportunity," said Reggie Collins, Chelan Fruit general manager. "We know it will be positive for our growers and their returns."

Chelan Fruit lost its Plant No. 1 after lightning struck Chelan Butte and fire blew into town.

The plant included nine buildings totaling 240,000 square feet, a pre-size apple line and two apple packing lines. It had space for 111,000 bins of controlled atmosphere storage, 23,000 bins of regular storage, 10,000 bins of pre-sized storage and 200,000 boxes of packed fruit. The fire also destroyed 225,000 empty bins and other equipment.

About 450,000 boxes of packed fruit from the 2014 harvest was lost at a value of around \$8 million. A couple thousand bins of early 2015 Gala apples were lost.

Next door, Plant No. 2 sustained smoke and cosmetic damage and was quickly cleaned, fixed and returned to operation.

Insurance will replace everything without any cost to the 300 grower-members, Collins said.

Chelan Fruit secured controlled atmosphere storage and empty bins from Gold Digger in Oroville, Gebbers Farms in Brewster, Manson Fruit Cooperative in Manson and Columbia Fruit Packers and Custom Apple Packers, both in Wenatchee.

That help, the smaller crop and double-shifting at its other packing facilities is enabling Chelan Fruit to handle the crop "as normal with no additional stress on us as to when to pack and sell," Collins said.

Plant No. 1 demolition is in final stages. The plant will be rebuilt with new controlled atmosphere and refrigeration technology replacing that of the 1970s, he said.

Company officials have visited tree fruit plants in Washington, California, France and Poland and is looking at MAF or Compac for the new pre-sizer, he said.

"We're looking into as much robotic equipment as possible. The old pre-sizer took 50 people to run and the new one should be 10," he said.

No one will lose their jobs, he said, because the co-op has been short packing workers.

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