

Bee time in Washington orchards

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

EAST WENATCHEE, Wash. — Honeybees are so intent on their work in Bruce Nash’s apricot orchard that they just buzz on around you if you get too close.

Bees collect pollen from blossoms to feed their young. As they do, they inadvertently spread pollen from tree to tree. Growers take advantage of that by planting pollenizers — a scattering of a different variety of the same tree fruit — throughout their orchards so the bees cross pollinate, increasing fruit size and yield.

Warm weather should give Nash good pollination and a large crop. Cool weather, rain and wind keep bees in their hives and diminish pollination.

“I love this time of year. The color of the blossoms and the bees humming around. They never bother you. They’re too busy, but then I don’t mow real close to the bee box either,” says Nash, 69, a retired police officer who believes he owns the only commercial apricot orchard within East Wenatchee’s city limits.

It’s only 46 trees on part of an acre, but Nash averages 350 boxes of apricots per season that he sells through the nearby Northern Fruit Co. Inc. It’s a hobby, supplemental income and “what keeps me young,” Nash says.

The bees will only work in Nash’s cots a week or two, from bloom to petal fall. Two hive boxes are all he needs. They come from Dereck Kramar, Wenatchee, one of many beekeepers in the region.

Hiatt Honey Co., Ephrata, is one of Washington’s largest beekeepers. The company owns 15,000 to 18,000 hives and winters their bees in Maderas, Calif., before renting them out for pollinat-



Photos by Dan Wheat/Capital Press
Bruce Nash enjoys blossoms in his apricot orchard. He believes it’s the only commercial apricot orchard within the East Wenatchee, Wash., city limits.



A honeybee hovers over apricot blossoms in Bruce Nash’s East Wenatchee, Wash., orchard on March 29. Bees collect pollen to feed their young but also help pollinate blossoms..

ing almonds and then moving them north to Washington’s tree fruit and east to Bowman, N.D., to work summer flowers making honey.

Despite reports of higher mortality this past winter nationally, there should be enough bees for Central Washington’s tree fruit and row crops and Western Washington’s berries, said Tim Hiatt, co-owner of Hiatt Honey Co.

“I’ve heard no rumors of shortages,” he said.

The national average winter bee loss is about 33 percent from Varroa mite, other pests and diseases, Hiatt said. It used to be far lower but Colony Collapse Disorder and probably pesticides have also taken a toll.

As of the last day of March, bees were busy pollinating apricots and cherries in Pasco, the lower Yakima Valley and Mat-tawa. They were just starting in the Wenatchee area. Pollination of cherries, pears and apples



Honeybees fly in and out of two hive boxes in Bruce Nash’s East Wenatchee, Wash., apricot orchard, March 29. They help pollinate the crop.

will continue through April.

Silver Bow Honey Company in Moses Lake and Olson Honey Farms in Yakima truck their bees to Western Washington to pollinate berries in May after finishing tree fruit in Central Washington, Hiatt said. Silver Bow and Olson also have summer contracts in Central Washington for onions, canola, carrots, radish seed and other row crops.

“We have too many bees to compete in that so we go to North Dakota,” he said.

Washington changes policy on H-2A housing inspections

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A Washington farm labor association is warning growers who have applied for H-2A workers to check whether they need to take additional steps for the state Employment Security Department to certify the workers will have suitable housing.

Dan Fazio, director of WA-FLA, formerly known as the Washington Farm Labor Association, credits state agencies with aggressively working to clear up a backlog of housing inspections.

He also, however, faults the agencies for failing to publicize a change in state policy that he says left some growers unaware of a new procedure that in some cases could delay applications for workers.

“There was a total lack of communication,” Fazio said. “They never told people there was a change of policy.”

The H-2A program requires growers to provide worker housing that meets state and federal health and safety standards. The state inspects and approves the housing on behalf of the U.S. Department of Labor.

In previous years, growers have been allowed to attest in writing they had repaired problems found by state Department of Health inspections.

The health department and ESD agreed Feb. 4 to require re-inspections after repairs were made.

Fazio said he learned about the new policy roughly six weeks later while checking with the Labor Department on the status of H-2A applications.

He said he immediately began notifying growers affected by the new policy and every one was unaware of the change.

The new policy led to more than a dozen growers mistakenly thinking their housing was approved, Fazio said.

The policy wasn’t widely publicized until a March 21 notice to growers, ESD spokesman Bill Tarrow said.

“I think looking in retrospect we probably could have done a better job with that,” he said.

Tarrow said the new rule conforms with Labor Department regulations. The state checked with federal officials at the request of the Northwest Justice Project, a publicly funded legal aid program.

Northwest Justice attorney Michele Besso said she became concerned about the procedure for approving housing because of conditions at a Yakima apartment building occupied by H-2A workers.

She said she was surprised to learn the state had not been verifying that repairs had been made before workers arrived.

“I had assumed they were already doing it,” Besso said.

ESD’s agricultural programs director, Craig Carroll, said Tuesday inspectors have found deficiencies in 14 housing inspections so far. He said 10 cases have been cleared, and he expects the other four to be certified in the next several days.

An increasing number of Washington farms have been applying to import foreign workers on temporary visas.

Carroll said the state has received about 90 applications for H-2A workers so far and anticipates receiving about 150 this year, topping last year’s 125.

“We’re receiving applications daily,” he said.

Most housing units are passing the initial inspection by the health department, Carroll said.

Ecology sending more letters to property owners

Most landowners have not taken action, official says

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

The Washington State Department of Ecology will send more letters to southeastern Washington farmers and ranchers about environmental problems on their operations, a department official says.

Most of the letters previously sent to landowners were ignored, special assistant to the director Kelly Susewind said during a March 30 meeting of the department’s Agriculture and Water Quality Advisory Committee.

He expects the new letters to go out within a month.

Rather than evaluate new properties, the department reassessed land owned by 50 producers — 30 contacted in 2013 and 20 contacted in 2015. All farms got at least two letters, Susewind said.

Of the 50 sites, five landowners fixed the problems, Susewind said. A few more told Ecology officials they are working with technical service providers to resolve the problem, he said.

“And then we’ve got the bulk of them we have not heard from and the problems are still there,” he said.

In 2013 the department was criticized by producers because the letters about problems were vague. That prompted the creation of the advisory committee. Susewind said the next letters will clearly identify the problem.

Problems include livestock getting into streams or other water quality issues.

The department will also attempt to directly contact ranchers and farmers.

Ecology will send letters thanking those property owners who have fixed the problem and to property owners who are working with providers or producer groups to get an update on efforts.

“For those we haven’t heard from and we’re still seeing problems, we need to ratchet it up,” he said. “We’ve been warning folks for years now and if they’re



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press
Kelly Susewind, left, special assistant to the director of the Washington Department of Ecology, talks with Aaron Golladay, co-chair of Ecology’s Agriculture and Water Quality Advisory Committee and first vice president of the Washington Farm Bureau, March 30 following a committee meeting in Spokane.

still just ignoring us, and they still continue have those operations that are causing a problem. ... What we can’t have anymore is radio silence.”

Some landowners may have been contacted five to seven times, Susewind said.

Susewind said no penalty is involved — yet.

“This is the precursor ‘We don’t want to get to that, please work with us’ letter,” he said. “If you get a letter, it’s not time to panic, it’s time to contact us.”

Aaron Golladay, co-chair of the advisory committee and first vice president for the Washington Farm Bureau, praised the department for changing its process for

dealing with landowners.

“I think that’s fair — (landowners) have had an opportunity,” he said. “You can disagree with them, but you still need to sit with them, say you disagree and why.”

Jack Field, executive vice president of the Washington State Cattlemen’s Association, said Ecology has a plan to notify landowners and other groups that might help.

Field urged letter recipients to contact their conservation district, the Natural Resources Conservation Service or Washington State University or solve the problem on their own, but also acknowledge receiving the letter and follow up with Ecology.

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