

Thomas Orchards benefit from unique location

By **CRAIG REED**
For the Capital Press

KIMBERLY, Ore. — After driving for miles through red-dish colored rocky canyons or along rivers with long narrow cattle pastures on either side of the waterways, to come

around a corner and see an orchard in the middle of the remoteness is a bit surprising.

But the orchard that lies near Kimberly has been there for 100 years. Kimberly is mainly a rural ranch community in northcentral Oregon with only a small country

store and post office to mark the spot.

Oren Kimberly planted the first and only commercial orchard on the narrow valley floor on both sides of the North Fork of the John Day River. The orchard, featuring a variety of fruits,

grew to 200 acres.

In 1947, W.B. and Emily Thomas began purchasing the orchard. Today, 100 acres of the orchard remain in the Thomas family and are owned by Jeff and Laura Thomas. Jeff Thomas is a grandson of W.B. and Emily Thomas.

The other 100 acres has been owned by Azure Farms since 2011.

"There's not another orchard around," Jeff Thomas said of the remoteness of Kimberly. "There's a unique micro climate here. It's 1,800 feet but with a desert climate. It's a micro climate that allows tree fruits to be grown."

Thomas said the daytime highs in the summer line up with the temperatures in the fruit growing areas to the north.

"A lot of the temperatures and harvest dates usually line up with the orchards in the Hood River and The Dalles areas," he said.



Craig Reed/For the Capital Press

An employee of Thomas Orchards near Kimberly, Ore., rakes prunings into a row in late February. The 100-acre orchard that lies along the North Fork of the John Day River is about 100 years old. It includes a variety of fruit trees.

Thomas said there have been freezes and crop damage at times over the years, but that is why there is such variety in the orchard. The tree fruits are cherries, apricots, pluots/plumcots, semi-cling

peaches, freestone peaches, nectarines, plums/prunes, pears and summer and fall apples. There are also several varieties of each fruit.

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