

Former ICA chief dies

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Sara Braasch Schmidt, 45, former executive vice president of the Idaho Cattle Association, died June 5 at her home.

Braasch Schmidt first worked at ICA as its special projects director from 1992 to 1995. She returned as ICA's executive vice president in 1997 and served at its helm until 2003.

"To say that Sara was brilliant is not an overstatement," said Karen Williams, ICA natural resources policy adviser.

She was also a natural-born leader, and that was evident in the way she could take charge of any situation, whether in a meeting, a policy discussion, or in a social setting. Those two attributes made her a "force to reckon with" in leading the Idaho Cattle Association, Williams said.

"It seemed as though she was always several steps ahead of everyone else in figuring out solutions to complex problems facing our industry," she said.

She started as executive vice president in the year gray wolves were reintroduced to the state. Her political experience (working for Sen. Larry Craig in Washington, D.C.) and innate problem-solving skills were keenly needed during that time and enabled her to navigate the industry to an unprecedented practical approach to raising livestock in the presence of a federally-protected predator — and ultimately paved the way for the species delisting, Williams said.

She was also behind the Beef Cattle Environmental Control Act, which was another unprecedented and practical approach to federal overreach, wherein the state gave regulatory authority of beef CAFOs to the state rather than EPA, she said.

"Wherever Sara led ICA, from the state Legislature to NCBA, she positioned the association to be the respected voice for our industry, both in state and nationwide," she said.

"These types of proactive actions, which Sara accomplished over and over, left our industry better prepared to face and overcome its future challenges. And she did it all with that signature smile on her face," she said.

"I consider it a great honor to have learned from the best," she added.

After serving as executive director, Braasch Schmidt served as executive director of the Idaho Rural Partnership, regional assistant chief of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and administrator for the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission. In 2011, she started her own consulting company, Summit Business Solutions in Meridian, said Britany Hurst, ICA communications director.

After a long battle with breast cancer, her death was not unexpected but still shocking, Hurst said.

A funeral mass will be said Monday, June 13, beginning at 11 a.m. at St. Mark's Catholic Church in Boise. A celebration of life will be held at 1 p.m., immediately following a luncheon at St. Mark's. A private family interment in McCall will be held at a later date.

Services are under the direction of Accent Funeral Home in Meridian.

Memorial contributions can be made to the Sara Braasch Schmidt Endowment designated within the Idaho FFA Foundation or to the Heartland Hunger and Resource Center in McCall.



Sara Braasch Schmidt

Labor in short supply in Central Wash.

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Domestic cherry pickers and H-2A visa foreign guestworkers used in apple thinning are in short supply this season in Central Washington orchards.

With cherry harvest in full swing in Mattawa and the Royal Slope, a lot of "Help Wanted" signs have gone up, said Mike Robinson, general manager of Double Diamond Fruit Co. in Quincy.

"People with good crops are not having trouble finding workers. Those with light crops are not having such good luck. It doesn't matter what they're offering to pay," Robinson said.

Robinson is frustrated by not being able to get enough H-2A workers in a timely fashion for company orchards. They arrive two weeks late and, he said, he's waited as long as two months past the date of need for some.

"You change your plans. Instead of (hand) blossom thinning, you do more chemical thinning," he said, adding that better yield and return bloom is achieved by hand thinning apples.

Robinson said he's heard that federal agencies approving H-2A applications are swamped and that the Obama administration doesn't like the H-2A program.

"I don't know which is true," he said.

Zirkle Fruit Co. in Selah, Wash., is one of the largest tree fruit companies in the state. It hired 2,889 H-2A workers in 2015, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

For 11 years, Zirkle Fruit has hired its H-2A workers directly rather than going through WAFLA, formerly the Washington Farm Labor Association.

WAFLA provided 67 percent of the 11,844 H-2A work-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Elias Pablo picks Tieton cherries at Lyall Orchards in Desert Aire, Wash., on May 25. Growers with light crops are having trouble finding enough pickers, and many foreign guestworkers are arriving late.

ers in Washington last season through contracts with growers.

Harold Austin, director of orchard administration at Zirkle Fruit, said the company is behind in getting H-2A workers and that the process seems to grow more difficult every year.

U.S. State Department visa approvals at consulates in Mexico now are taking three days, twice the time they once did, he said. That means applicants need to arrive at consulates on Monday or Tuesday so they are not stuck there over a weekend, he said.

"It's more difficult each year to find domestic workers and more companies and even smaller growers are using WAFLA," Austin said.

Fewer workers migrate from California and Zirkle will continue using H-2A because "there's not a lot of other options," he said.

McDougall & Sons Inc. in Wenatchee uses about 700 H-2A workers and has been getting them on time, said Scott McDougall, co-presi-

dent. In combination with its year-around domestic labor force, the company is doing well, he said.

WAFLA has been dealing with federal delays of H-2A applications since February. On April 21 the American Farm Bureau Federation warned that H-2A delays in more than 20 states were fast approaching crisis proportions and threatening crops.

Much of the problem was caused by the U.S. Department of Labor shortening the time for non-agricultural H-2B-visa applications, resulting in three-fourths of the applications arriving Jan. 2, flooding the agency, Kerry Scott, program manager of masLabor in Lovington, Va., said in April.

"There was no way to keep up and they didn't want to. They wanted to make it as difficult as possible, knew it would cause chaos and it did," Scott said.

By April the backlog was largely resolved, he said.

MasLabor is the largest provider of H-2A and H-2B workers in the nation and pro-

vides about 500 H-2A workers to Washington state growers.

On May 9, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced it would begin transmitting applicant information electronically to the Department of State to speed up procedures.

On June 1, WAFLA CEO Dan Fazio said it got 90 percent of the 5,000 H-2A workers it needed for Washington growers in May but the process remains slow and difficult.

Timelines are too tight for the one state and four federal agencies involved, he said. What once was a 60-day process now takes longer because of greater scrutiny by the Department of Labor and USCIS, he said.

"We have three agencies that have to do approval in the last 30 days or less and are not able to do so," Fazio said.

USCIS still will not accept scanned signatures and is using regular mail instead of email to ask why the same person's signature appears on some documents from multiple companies, he said.

Cherries escape first heat wave

Labor top concern

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Cherries are in full harvest throughout Central Washington with excellent quality despite hot weather. Lack of labor is the big concern.

"Labor in packing sheds is suitable but will get better when school gets out. There's definitely a shortage in the orchards," said Roger Pepperl, marketing director at Stemilt Growers LLC, Wenatchee, the nation's largest sweet cherry producer.

Schools in the Wenatchee area finish June 10. Stemilt is counting on high school and college students to help in warehouses.

Stemilt is running double shifts at its two cherry packing plants which takes 1,500 people. The company is tight but doing OK using H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers in company owned or managed orchards where 65 to 70 percent of Stemilt's cherry volume comes from versus grower-members, Pepperl said.

B.J. Thurlby, president of the industry promotional organization, Northwest Cherry Growers in Yakima, said a grower told him he might not get his crop picked because he can't find pickers. Another grower he talked to is paying a high piece rate for pickers plus a \$10 per bin bonus if they stay through harvest, he said.

"I'm hearing warehouses are paying over \$10 to \$11 per hour. My daughter just graduated from high school and yesterday finished her first 14-hour shift in a shed. She came home with that look on her face (a long day)," Thurlby said.

"Labor is short but there's money to be made. Growers hope pickers will come up from California when school gets out there at the end of this week (June 10)," he said.

Picking started record early on May 18 in Mattawa. A record 670,000, 20-pound boxes of cherries were shipped by the end of May, Thurlby said. Shipments reached 2 million



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Teresa Pascual picks Tieton cherries at Lyall Orchards in Desert Aire, Wash., May 25. Two weeks later pickers and packers are in short supply.

boxes by June 7, when in a normal year, they would just be starting. The crop is forecast at 18.3 million and may finish in July instead of August.

Four days of hot weather, June 4 through 7, so far don't appear to have harmed quality, but could have had they continued, Thurlby said.

Growers are finishing early varieties — Chelan, Tieton and Santana — and moving into Bing which is 30 percent lighter than normal.

"Fewer Bings on the trees gives trees more vigor and helps fruit stand up better to heat," Thurlby said.

But pickers don't like fewer cherries per tree because

they have to keep moving, working harder, Pepperl said. Prolonged heat reduces cherry firmness and picking hours, he said. Stemilt prefers cherries not be picked above 85 degrees to preserve quality.

Thurlby called quality "vintage," said cherries are "gorgeous" at 10-row (large) and larger and show no heat stress.

Last year, 10 days of hot weather in mid-June followed by a one-week cool down followed by another seven or eight days of extreme heat, damaged quality and compressed the harvest, glutting the market after the Fourth of July and depressing prices.



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