

Southwestern Idaho farmers raise pay to keep workers

Tight labor market pushing up wages at all skill levels

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

CALDWELL, Idaho — The southwestern Idaho labor market has tightened to the point agricultural producers are paying significantly more to find and keep farm workers.

“It’s gotten really bad; it’s a tough labor market,” said Meridian farmer Richard Durant. “There just aren’t very many workers out there.”

Durant has paid common farm laborers such as pipe movers \$10 to \$11 an hour in the past but has had to pay them \$12 to \$14 an hour this year.

He’s not alone. Other producers, such as Ron Bitner, who owns a vineyard and winery in Caldwell, is paying his workers about \$1.50 an hour more this year, which costs him about \$800 more a month in labor.

He’s also had to keep people employed even when there’s no significant work for them to do just to ensure he has an adequate labor force when he really needs it at harvest time.

If he doesn’t keep them employed, “They could easily go out and find something else,” he said. “I just go ahead and hire them and give them other things to do ... so I have a crew available when I need them.”

Durant is doing the same thing.

“You have to find something to keep them going all year round or they’re going to disappear and you won’t get them back,” he said.

Bitner, Durant and other farmers say the region’s booming economy, particularly the construction sector, is the major factor in the tightened labor force.

The unemployment rate for the Boise metropolitan area, which includes most of southwestern Idaho, is 3.7 percent and the building sector is booming.

“Anybody who can swing a hammer can get \$20 an hour on the construction side,” Durant said.

The region’s labor-intensive fruit industry has been particularly hard hit by the scarcity of workers.

Michael Williamson, owner of Williamson Orchards and Vineyards in Caldwell, one of Idaho’s three largest fruit orchards, had to raise his labor rates \$1 an hour in June to attract workers and is still having difficulty finding them.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press
Farmworkers pick Chardonnay wine grapes Aug. 19 in a southwestern Idaho vineyard. Farmers in the region say they are having to pay much more this year to attract and keep workers because of a significantly tighter labor market.



Courtesy of Port of Seattle
A ship docks at the Louis Dreyfus Co. grain terminal at the Port of Seattle. The company has settled a citizen lawsuit filed by Puget Soundkeeper Alliance that alleged violations of the Clean Water Act.

Seattle grain exporter to pay \$699,000 to settle lawsuit

Judge rules company spilled grain into bay

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A Dutch corporation that exports grain from the Port of Seattle has agreed to pay \$699,000 to settle allegations by an environmental group that the company violated the Clean Water Act by spilling grain into Elliott Bay.

The Louis Dreyfus Co. also will modify its pier and conveyance system to prevent spills while unloading rail cars and loading vessels, according to a consent decree that must be approved by a federal judge.

The settlement would be the second-largest ever won by Puget Soundkeeper Alliance, which filed the citizen lawsuit in 2014.

Chris Wilke, the group’s executive director, said the amount of grain spilled can’t be measured, but maintained it was enough to cause damage.

“It was not a trace by any means,” he said. “We believe the environmental impact is quite significant.”

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Chris Wilke, Puget Soundkeeper Alliance’s executive director

The company declined to comment.

Puget Soundkeeper alleged the company’s lack of record-keeping deprived the environmental group’s members of having enough information to advance their mission of protecting and improving water quality.

After the suit was filed, an attorney for Puget Soundkeeper obtained from the company surveillance video of the grain terminal. In a key pre-trial ruling in June, U.S. District Judge Richard Jones found that the evidence showed grain had been spilled into the bay nine times since 2014.

The company also failed to regularly vacuum paved surfaces at the terminal, a violation of its state pollution-control permit, the judge ruled.

Shortly after the ruling, Dreyfus and Puget Soundkeeper agreed to the out-of-court settlement. Dreyfus denies any wrongdoing.

“The summary judgment was quite substantial and definitely enough to get the attention of the defendants,” Wilke said. “The Clean Water Act is clear — foreign substances are generally considered pollutants.”

Dreyfus also agreed to pay Puget Soundkeeper \$403,000 in legal fees and other litigation expenses.

If approved by the judge, the \$699,000 will go into a privately managed fund for Puget Sound environmental projects. The fund was started with a \$1.5 million settlement in 2011 between Puget Soundkeeper and BNSF Railway. A grant-making charity, the Rose Foundation in Oakland, Calif., oversees the fund.

Puget Soundkeeper has filed citizen lawsuits and settled with several other companies, including Trident Foods in Tacoma, and Total Terminals International and SSA Terminals, both at the Port of Seattle.

Mormon crickets seen, but few damage reports

Large insects crawl, cannibalize; ‘kind of creepy’

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Mormon crickets have been spotted in Central Washington this summer, but there are few reports of damage, Washington State University researchers say.

Mormon crickets, so-called for their early runs-in with Mormon settlers and because the males chirp, are actually a katydid, said Dale Whaley, extension specialist in Waterville, Wash.

“They’re voracious eaters, they have large mandibles — they can get into crops and just devour plants,” Whaley said.

The crickets impact forage crops, small grains and orchards, climbing trees and feeding on the fruit.

The insects have been found in Okanogan County, down by Malott, Wash., and near Nespelem, Wash., on the Colville Indian Reservation.

“They were crossing the road there earlier this year, literally by the hundreds,” Whaley said. “They’re so large, driving at 60 mph, they almost look like small mice running down the road, even though they’re not.”

The crickets cannot fly, even though they have wings, so they crawl, Whaley said.

“The reason they move the way they do, these guys are known to cannibalize each other,” Whaley said. “That’s why the guys in the front, if they’re leading the pack, are constantly moving. If they stop, the guys behind them could come up and start chomping on them.”

Cannibalism is evident when crickets are hit by cars, Whaley said. Living crickets will feed on the dead ones.

“It’s kind of creepy,” Whaley said.

Mormon crickets are a secondary pest not seen every year. Favorable conditions include a mild winter where eggs survive, and low thresholds for predators such as small birds and small raptors.

The crickets are probably always present in small numbers, but if they start to become plentiful, then farmers begin to notice and ask questions of extension personnel.

“If you’re seeing one, two, three, it’s not going to be a problem,” he said. “But if you’re seeing hundreds upon thousands, that’s when you’re going to have an issue.”

Elizabeth Beers, entomologist with the WSU Tree Fruit Research and Extension Center in Wenatchee, said Mormon crickets have been seen near or entering orchards, but she’s heard no reports of serious damage.

Orchards surrounded by rangeland or forested areas are more likely to see them.

“It has been an intermittent pest for some time, and will probably continue to be one in the future,” Beers said.

USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is working to monitor the crickets and determine when and how they move. Whaley said. The crickets can move up to 1.5 miles per day, and up to 50 miles per season.

Insecticides and bait traps can be used to control populations. The best time to control the crickets is at the nymphal stage in spring.

The Mormon crickets could still be a problem on a case-by-case basis, Beers said.

“These are very large animals,” she said. “If they’re coming into your orchard, you’re going to notice them.”

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