

Capital Press

The West's **Ag** Weekly

“ Orchard wages are so high that it’s pulling from warehouses and warehouses are short.”

Grower Dave Taber



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Sylvia Almaguer packs a box of Red Delicious apples at Valicoff Fruit Co. on Oct. 12. The packing shed was short 12 workers that day.

LABOR PAINS

Orchards, farms make it through another harvest season with too few workers — and many worries about the future

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WAPATO, Wash. — “Packers needed” signs, in English and Spanish, were tacked to stacks of apple bins outside Valicoff Fruit Co.

Inside, Maria Sanchez and Joaquin Melo Vaca, both from nearby Toppenish, filled out job applications for two of 12 openings.

“We’ve been short since we began this season’s packing the first week of August,” said Brett Valicoff, general manager, the morning of Oct. 12.

The remaining positions were only filled once harvest wound down, allowing some employees who had been picking to shift to packing, he said two weeks later.

Valicoff Fruit’s predicament reflects the new normal for many U.S. growers. In some cases, the number of jobs is growing as the number of workers stagnates, forcing more employers to turn to the costly and cumbersome H-2A visa program for foreign guestworkers. It also underscores the need for Congress to improve that program and reform U.S. immigration policies. At the same time, it drives the quest for greater mechanization.

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Dan Wheat/Capital Press

A crew picks Honeycrisp apples at Brewster, Wash., in August 2015. Washington state’s apple harvest is labor-intensive, requiring about 50,000 field workers annually.

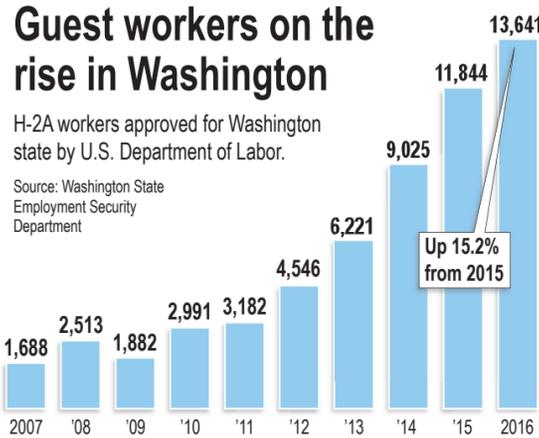


Brett Valicoff

Guest workers on the rise in Washington

H-2A workers approved for Washington state by U.S. Department of Labor.

Source: Washington State Employment Security Department



Dan Wheat and Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

WDFW spent \$119,500 to shoot seven wolves



Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Official: Money not reason for suspending hunt

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Washington spent more than \$119,500 to kill seven wolves, according to Department of Fish and Wildlife wolf policy coordinator

Donny Martorello, who said the agency will look at culling wolf-packs in the future in “the most frugal way we can.”

“We know that lethal removal is part of wolf management. It’s some-

thing that will occur again in Washington,” he said. “I do think that as an agency we have to think about cost-savings.”

WDFW spent the money during an operation that began Aug. 4 and ended Oct. 19 in northeastern Washington. Expenses included renting a helicopter, hiring a trapper, and

paying the salaries and benefits of WDFW employees.

A preliminary figure, \$119,577.92, was tallied in response to public disclosure requests and was posted by an advocacy group, Protect the Wolves. Martorello said a

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New community hastens loss of Ada County farmland

Development sited on 1,500 acres of prime ag ground

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — A planned community with 1,750 homes and 80,000 square feet of commercial space in the north part of Boise is hastening the loss of farmland, an increasingly rare commodity in Ada County.

The Dry Creek Ranch development,

which is expected to cost about \$100 million, will be sited on 1,500 acres of prime farmland. Ada County, Idaho’s most populous, still has 1,223 farms and \$221 million worth of annual ag production but that farmland is disappearing.

According to the Ada Soil and Water Conservation District, Ada County had 244,218 acres of farmland in 1974 but only 144,000 now. Twenty-seven

percent of the county is ag land today but the county’s new comprehensive plan expects that number to drop to 18 percent over the next 15-20 years.

In Canyon County, which borders Ada, total farmland increased 2,000 acres, to 206,469, over the past three years.

The loss of 1,500 acres of prime farmland right next to her own farm was too much for Josie Erskine, who plans to move her Peaceful Belly Farm

“It’s easier to farm if your neighbor’s a farmer.”

Josie Erskine, Peaceful Belly Farm

about 30 miles west to Canyon County. Though her farm would be protected under Idaho’s Right to Farm Act, Erskine doesn’t like the idea of

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