

Washington

Red raspberry growers harvest record crop

Yield up, price down after drought year

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Western Washington's red raspberry farmers grew a record crop this year, though the payoff may be no better than from last year's drought-diminished harvest.

Good weather, increased acreage and new varieties maturing helped boost production to 78.2 million pounds, Washington Red Raspberry Commission Executive Director Henry Bierlink said.

The yield surpassed the previous record of 72.4 million pounds set in 2014.

"We were a little shocked by the numbers at the end of the year," Bierlink said.

All 96 of the raspberry commission's growers are in Western Washington, including 78 in Whatcom County in the northwestern corner of the state.

Washington leads the country in producing red raspberries for processing. California is the top supplier of red raspberries for the fresh market.

Washington heavily influences market prices. Its large crop contributed to pushing average field prices down to about 90 cents a pound.

The price is comparable or above most years in the past decade, but a drop from last year's average price of \$1.43 per pound. The raspberry commission reported a 2015 harvest of only 52.6 million pounds, far below normal.

The total value of this year's record crop probably will be about the same as last year's small harvest, said Lynden grower Jon Mayberry.

Growers compete with imported raspberries from Chile and Serbia, and a strong dollar will be another factor weighing down prices, he said.

"The increase in production pretty much will be off-

set by the decline in prices," Mayberry said. "We're not complaining. It's great to have a bumper crop, but all the stars didn't align."

The summer of 2015 was the hottest ever in northwestern Washington, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The berries struggled in the heat.

This summer, the region had its seventh hottest summer, but received above average rainfall, according to records dating back to 1895.

"We came out of the winter with minimal winter injury, and the growing conditions for the crop were pretty much ideal. We had rain at the right time and not too much," Mayberry said.

The crop also was helped by the further development of a relatively new cultivar, the Wakefield raspberry, he said. "It performed very well countywide," he said.

The raspberry commission's report for 2015 differed sharply from statewide figures compiled by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

NASS calculated that Washington's red raspberry crop in the drought year was a 72.7 million pounds, about 20 million pounds more than reported by the raspberry commission.

The crop size and strong prices led NASS to report that the value of the state's red raspberry crop in 2015 was \$89 million, a 51 percent increase over 2014.

Chris Mertz, Northwest director of NASS, said his office will talk with the raspberry commission to review the apparent discrepancy and will revise its numbers if necessary.

Some raspberries are grown in Yakima and Walla Walla counties, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, and would not be reflected in the commission's numbers.

Helping veterans become farmers

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

SPOKANE — The Spokane Conservation District is helping Eastern Washington veterans apply their military training to farming.

Vets on the Farm is designed to help veterans transitioning from military careers into agriculture, said Vicki Carter, district director.

"We look at both agriculture and our military as being the backbone of our country," Carter said. "The two have this beautiful, hand-in-hand fit, where the vets are coming out with some very transferable skills."

The district provides veterans with educational opportunities, hands-on experience, internships and mentorships. Veterans are paired with farmer-mentors and other veterans to maintain the sense of community they experience in the military, Carter said.

"It's really a part of them, and it's hard for them to separate from as they transition out," she said. "We provide some of that camaraderie as well."

In the last two years, the program expanded from Spokane to Stevens, Chelan, Douglas, Whitman, Franklin and Benton counties. Carter said Vets on the Farm has assisted more than 100 veterans.

KD Thompson, a former Army specialist, is interested in producing herbs and composting on a small scale. She gets help continuing her education and making connections.

"I didn't know anything about drip irrigation before, now I'm kind of a pro," she said. "Being around other veterans, too, it is kind of nice to have people who know what you've been through."

Ben Parriman, a technical sergeant in the Air National Guard and Carter's son, said he enjoys working outside and getting his hands dirty.

"This field of work is right up my alley," he said. "I run heavy equipment, so running



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Spokane Conservation District Director Vicki Carter holds a pole for son Ben Parriman, right, a technical sergeant in the Air National Guard, while building a greenhouse on the Vets on the Farm learning farm, as former U.S. Army specialist KD Thompson watches. The program helps veterans build a career in agriculture.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Air National Guard member Ben Parriman, top, tightens a pole on a greenhouse while Army veteran KD Thompson helps.

tractors to me is like second nature. I pick this stuff up very quickly."

Parriman takes a sustainable farming and ranching class at a Spokane community college. He and his wife even-

tually want to find property, he said.

A 3-acre learning farm opened in April, producing tomatoes and small vegetables. The district may add herbs

Online

<http://sccd.org/programs/vets-on-the-farms>

and small animals such as chickens, goats and bees for pollination and honey production.

Carter said the district wants to expand the learning farm into an incubator farm concept.

"If we can train (veterans) on a smaller scale here ... they can lease or take over existing land that's sitting idle and be productive," she said.

She has an "overwhelming" number of farmers willing to partner with veterans. Carter said she frequently receives emails and calls.

Carter said the biggest needs include a small tractor, wheelbarrows and power tools.

Farmers can donate to sponsor a veteran, she said.

"This is great, but they can't work for free, they need to make a living while they're learning," she said.

The district is seeking \$345,000 in state funding to put veteran-farmers on projects in 12 counties. The request includes a state coordinator and a full-time employee in each county.

Municipal bond sale raises \$22M for new Odessa waterline

Columbia River water slated for delivery in 2018

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

The East Columbia Basin Irrigation District has completed the sale of municipal bonds to help pay for construction of a pipeline to provide Columbia River water to Odessa Subarea farmers.

Manager Craig Simpson said the Oct. 27 sale raised roughly \$22.5 million. The district will use some of the proceeds for construction of the EL 47.5 pipeline pumping plant and distribution system.

The sale was the first district financing of the distribution system, said Mike Schwisow, director of government rela-

tions for the Columbia Basin Development League.

"This is the first time we're acquiring capital from the bond market to be repaid by the landowners," Schwisow said.

The irrigation district has the repayment obligation, Simpson said. Landowners have written contracts with the district to pay for the construction costs. Revenue collected from the landowners will go to debt service.

The district has capped the cost to landowners at \$253 per acre for 30 years. The league hopes to reduce the cost to less than \$200 per acre.

Some \$15 million raised will go to serving 8,200 acres that are signed up for water, Schwisow said. The pipeline will serve fewer than 10 farmers, he said.

Work on the pumping plant on the

East Low Canal needs to take place when the canal is dry, Schwisow said. "That needed to be done this year so we are in a position to deliver water in 2018."

The district also re-funded two existing bonds because interest rates are now lower. Doing that will save the district \$500,000 in interest payments, Simpson said.

A municipal bond is similar to a loan, but the interest payments to the bondholders are usually exempt from state and federal income taxes. Because of that feature, the interest rates are lower than for other forms of financing. Current interest rates are at historically low levels.

"With any luck, we come up with enough outside funding so we don't have to go to the bond market again," he said.

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