

Washington



Courtesy of Phillip Gross/Warden Hutterian Brethren Farms

Members of the Warden Hutterian Brethren harvest their wheat in July near Warden, Wash. Farmer Phillip Gross won the National Association of Wheat Growers' yield contest with a yield of 192.85 bushels per acre.

Washington farmer wins national wheat yield contest

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Phillip Gross knew he had a pretty good yield this year.

But he wasn't expecting to win the National Association of Wheat Growers yield contest.

"I definitely thought there would be some other growers knocking on the door of 200 bushels," Gross said.

Gross topped the award with 192.85 bushels per acre for irrigated wheat, 216 percent above the county average, according to NAWG.

Gross planted WestBred Keldin, a hard red winter wheat variety he's raised for several years. Gross said that's an unusual yield. He credited a significant boost provided by cooler flowering weather than normal.

"This is the biggest yield we've had on record," he said. One entire field averaged 192 bushels. Gross suspects

some parts of that field had even higher yields, but didn't have it staked out or tested for yields.

Gross farms with the Warden Hutterian Brethren Farms near Warden, Wash. The community raises about 9,000 acres of irrigated wheat and 2,000 acres of dryland wheat.

"A lot of our yields are dependent upon water availability," he said.

When the weather is warm, wheat takes a backseat to such crops as potatoes, peas or corn, Gross said.

"Wheat is a lot more flexible in that way—it allows you to use water elsewhere, and when you have some available later on, move it back again," he said.

The majority of the farm's acres are irrigated by the Odessa Subarea aquifer, which is declining. The farm is planning to install a pumping station south of its home base to replace aquifer water

with water from the Columbia River.

"It definitely needs to happen," Gross said. "It's unsustainable, pulling the amount of water from the aquifer and expecting it to be there year after year."

With river water, Gross expects to be able to draw bigger yields with better water that's not so high in sodium.

Falling number tests affected some of the soft white wheat varieties the community grew, with results dropping to roughly 230.

Farmers are docked at elevators for wheat below 300. Some hard red winter wheat escaped unscathed, he said.

Stripe rust also affected some "gold standard" varieties that never had the problem before, Gross said.

"So the rust strains are mutating," he said.

The price received varied throughout the farm, Gross said.

Battle lines are drawn in Washington over new wells

Environmentalists defend ruling

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Washington Supreme Court's ruling in Whatcom County vs. Hirst could shut down rural homebuilding statewide, a lobbyist for farm groups and other water users said Thursday at a House hearing.

"The more I listen to people discuss the Hirst case, the more convinced I am that there will be no growth in the rural area unless we solve the problem," said Kathleen Collins of the Washington Water Policy Alliance, whose members include irrigators, businesses and cities.

The House Agriculture and Local Government committees held a joint hearing to learn more about the October decision, in which the court ruled that new domestic wells can't impair existing water rights, including river flows.

Previously, domestic wells, which account for 1 percent of water use, were exempt from such review.

Many bills related to the ruling are likely to be introduced during the 2017 session.

Some groups, including the Washington Farm Bureau, hope lawmakers will blunt the decision. Although the ruling does not threaten to curtail irrigation water rights, the Farm Bureau condemned the decision for effectively pro-



Courtesy of TVW

Washington Water Policy Alliance lobbyist Kathleen Collins testifies Dec. 1 at a joint hearing of the House Agriculture and Local Government committees in Olympia. She warned that a recent state Supreme Court decision threatens to shut down homebuilding in rural areas. The Washington Farm Bureau condemns the ruling for barring farm families from drilling new domestic wells.

hibiting new homes for farm families.

Environmental groups signaled Wednesday they will defend the thrust of the ruling. The groups are influential in the House, where Democrats hold a majority of seats.

"Obviously, we have to get agreement with the environmental side. I hope that's possible," Collins said after the hearing.

In the Hirst case, the environmental group Futurewise and others challenged Whatcom County and the state Department of Ecology. Both agencies said new wells in the county would not harm water resources.

The court, however, ruled that small withdrawals of groundwater add up and deprive rivers of water for fish, wildlife and scenery.

The ruling means prospective homeowners may have to finance expensive studies to

prove their wells won't harm existing water rights. In some watersheds, water rights include minimum river flows set in previous decades by Ecology. Critics say the flow standards are too high and create an artificial scarcity of water.

Proving a new well won't intercept or draw water from a river may range from hard to impossible. Hydrologists say that groundwater and surface waters are connected.

"Water withdrawn from groundwater does impact surface water and therefore senior water rights," U.S. Geological Service hydrologist Matt Bachmann told House members.

"That impact is commonly too small to measure for a small domestic well, but it is not too small to measure cumulatively if you look at all domestic wells in a basin," he said.

SugarBee apples head to stores

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

CHELAN, Wash. — SugarBee, a new apple variety said to be sweeter than Honeycrisp, will be sold commercially for the first time this month.

Chelan Fresh Marketing is providing test marketing of first-year production to several Wal-Mart stores across the nation, Safeway in Northern California, Kroger and Whole Foods, said Mac Riggan, vice president of marketing at Chelan Fresh.

About 8,000, 40-pound boxes of SugarBee is being sold in holiday packaging, and the goal is to eventually sell whatever the market bears at a good profit, Riggan said.

"We've had head-to-head taste tests with Honeycrisp



Courtesy of Chelan Fresh Marketing
The new apple, SugarBee, is hitting selected markets in limited supply for the first time this month in holiday packaging. Chelan growers see it as a future money maker.

and it's beaten it hands down. Honeycrisp has a tendency to go flat, lose its flavor in storage. SugarBee doesn't do that," said Harold Schell, director of field services of Chelan Fruit Cooperative.

The co-op and Gebbers Farms, of Brewster, acquired

the exclusive rights to grow and sell the new apple from Regal Fruit International, a variety management affiliate of Willow Drive Nursery in Ephrata.

Regal obtained propagation rights from the patent-holder, apple breeder Chuck Nystrom, of Worthington, Minn., who discovered the variety in the early 1990s from his experimental seed plantings.

The mother seed is Honeycrisp and the father is an unknown pollinator likely carried by a honeybee, Schell said.

The resulting apple is mostly red but also yellow-skinned and is high in sugar content — hence the name SugarBee chosen by an advertising agency for Chelan Fresh.

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