

Washington

Study to focus on wolves' effect on other predators, prey

Researchers to collar ungulates, carnivores

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

A new study will determine the impact wolves have on other predators and their prey.

Researchers from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and University of Washington will capture and radio-collar deer, elk and cougars in northeastern Washington to monitor their movements.

"We have this situation



Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Washington researchers will study the impact wolves have on other predators and their prey. Results of the study are due in five years.

where we have an increasing wolf population," said John Pierce, chief wildlife scientist at the department. "What

we're really hoping to learn is, how is having wolves on the landscape changing or not changing effects on the animals that already live there?"

The study area includes parts of Ferry, Stevens and Pend Oreille counties.

Researchers began capturing and collaring animals in December. They will track and monitor the animals over time, Pierce said.

Pierce wants to find out if wolves add to cougar depredations that are already occurring, or if cougars alter their behavior and reduce their depredation as a result of the wolves' presence. Researchers will also study the

effect on the populations of the animals they prey upon.

So far the department has observed predator success in a limited, "qualitative" way to see if things are changing, Pierce said.

"We don't have any smoking gun," he said. "We felt we needed to look at it closer."

The study is slated to last five years, including roughly three to four years of data collection and a year of analysis.

The results could influence the state's management recommendations, Pierce said.

"It's going to come down to, how much of an effect

are we seeing on the ungulate population, and whether they're able to maintain themselves or the level of depredation is forcing that population to decline," he said. "Then we'd be looking at management options to try to arrest that decline."

The state will use past records on cougar depredations before wolves to compare them to the study results, Pierce said.

Funding includes \$400,000 from a 2015 state legislative appropriation; \$450,000 in federal funds; \$150,000 of department funds and \$900,000 in National Science Foundation grant funds.

Stemilt builds advanced fruit shipping center

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Stemilt Growers LLC, one of the largest non-citrus tree fruit companies on the West Coast, is building likely the largest and most advanced automated packed fruit storage and shipping center in the state.

The 479,000-square-foot facility will be able to store almost 1 million packed boxes of fruit and will allow more efficient handling, palletizing, storage and shipping of product, said Roger Pepperl, Stemilt marketing manager.

Automated Storage and Retrieval System (ASRS) involves movement, storage and retrieval for shipping of packed boxes of tree fruit using robotic cranes, automated dollies and computerized tracking for efficient flow and significant labor savings.

Matson Fruit Co. in Selah installed such a system three years ago. Reggie Collins, general manager of Chelan Fruit Cooperative, said the co-op considered an ASRS when rebuilding its plant in Chelan that was destroyed by a 2015 wildfire but decided the cost outweighed labor savings.

"We designed our buildings so we can do it in the future, but the systems are millions of dollars and only eliminated 75 percent of our forklift drivers. That's only six to eight paychecks right now," he said.

West Mathison, Stemilt president, said he doesn't know how much labor savings to expect and looks forward to better understanding the opportunity.

But most ASRS systems eliminate forklift drivers and require only one or two people per shift to monitor components of the system.

Collins said he thinks Matson has the only tree fruit ASRS in Washington and that there are some in California. It is more common in Europe and in the frozen food industry.

In 2013, several cold storage industry organizations estimated an ASRS system saves \$2.7 million per year for a plant with 18 workers for each of three shifts and each employee costing about



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Steel framing for Stemilt Growers' automated storage and shipping facility is erected in Wenatchee, Wash. The photo was taken Feb. 16.



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Stemilt Growers' 42,700-square-foot corporate office building, built in 2014, at its Olds Station packing plant in Wenatchee, Wash.

\$50,000 in wages, benefits and training.

New conventional storage costs about \$115 per square foot and ASRS systems cost about \$170 per square foot, according to cold storage organizations.

ASRS not only saves on labor, but energy, fire suppression and space. By racking fruit higher, up to three times the storage density of a conventional facility can be achieved.

Stemilt's ASRS will be somewhat denser than conventional storage but really higher, Pepperl said. It may rack as high as 10-pallet stacks, he said.

A pallet position is where one full pallet can be racked and stored. A multi-layer racking system will allow more than 16,000 pallet positions, Pepperl said.

The new facility is most-

ly steel framing right now to the immediate north of Stemilt's Olds Station plant. The 479,000 square feet includes a new concrete building, already up, for 11 rooms of controlled atmosphere pear storage.

Construction began last fall and will be completed in various phases over the next 12 months, he said. Stemilt is not disclosing the cost, he said.

Mathison said he's really proud of the vendors working on the project.

Beside storage and shipping there will be robotic palletizing of all fruit from the Olds Station plant's two-year-old, state-of-the-art apple packing line, a one-year-old optic-sizer, multi-color cherry line and an older dark sweet cherry line.

In time the palletizing, ASRS and shipping will serve

the former Dovex complex, acquired by Stemilt several years ago, across U.S. Highway 2 and south of the Olds plant, Mathison said. The Dovex complex has two newer cherry lines, two apple lines and a pear line.

Packed fruit will move from the packing plants to the palletizing, ASRS and shipping center through enclosed conveyor systems. There will be 22 truck bays at the shipping dock with room to expand, Pepperl said.

The place where the new facility is being built formerly held thousands of empty apple, pear and cherry bins when they were not in use. They will be stored now in other locations, some closer to orchards, he said.

Stemilt built a new, three-story, 42,700-square-foot corporate office building and cafeteria for all employees at the Olds Station plant in 2014.

Stemilt packs, sells and ships about 20 million boxes of apples, pears, cherries, stone fruit and blueberries annually. Stemilt receives fruit from independent growers and owns, partners and manages more than 14,000 acres of tree fruit. Partners include Douglas Fruit Co., Pasco, and Peshastin Hi-Up northwest of Wenatchee.

Stemilt acquired California cherry producer Chinchilo Fruit of Stockton in 2003. Stemilt packs, sells and ships a large percentage of Washington's organic apples and pears and has about 1,500 full-time employees.

WSDA estimates 2015 drought damage topped \$700 million

Estimate is conservative, report writer says

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

The 2015 drought caused \$703 million in economic damages to Washington farmers, according to an estimate by the state Department of Agriculture released Wednesday.

The report cited difficulties in pinpointing losses and stated the damage likely ranged between \$633 million and \$773 million, a 10 percent margin of error either way.

Even with the leeway, WSDA scientist Kelly McLain said the report likely understates the drought's impact.

"I do believe the report is conservative in estimating the economic damage," said McLain, who led the study along with WSDA hydrologist Jaclyn Hancock.

The Department of Ecology commissioned the study, the state's first-ever attempt to measure a drought's economic impact on agriculture. In May of 2015, WSDA estimated drought losses in the coming summer could reach \$1.2 billion if no emergency measures were taken.

"But much was done, by state and federal agencies, agriculture industry organizations, irrigation districts and farmers themselves," WSDA Director Derek Sandison wrote in an introduction to the report.

Ironically, USDA reported late last year that Washington agriculture set a production record in 2015, with crops and livestock fetching \$10.7 billion, topping by 5 percent the record set in 2014.

WSDA didn't attempt to assess the overall agriculture economy, but focused on losses and expenses absorbed by farmers due to heat and water shortages. The report doesn't measure the effects of higher commodity prices.

The department recommends in its report mapping out water rights that could be transferred in the next dry year to farmers vulnerable to drought.

"We need to be responsive and on top of it," McLain said.

In compiling the report, WSDA surveyed and interviewed farmers, visited fields and consulted with several organizations. The report also draws on figures from USDA's

National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Among the findings:

- A majority of the damage, \$501 million, was attributed to lower production for 15 crops that take up 77 percent of the state's planted acreage.

The crops that suffered the most economic damages were wheat, \$199.4 million; apples, \$61 million; cherries, \$38.8 million; feed corn, \$36.4 million; and hay, \$31.2 million.

- Farmers in the Roza Irrigation District in the Lower Yakima Valley suffered damages totaling \$75.78 million.

The losses could have been worse. Farmers activated 45 emergency wells. The wells hadn't been used in 10 years. Maintaining and operating the wells cost farmers an estimated \$972,000.

The irrigation district spent \$190,000 a day to lease water and add 14 days of irrigation. The cost of leasing the water is not reflected in the report.

- Dairy farmers reported buying more feed, leasing more grazing land and getting less milk. WSDA estimated their damages at \$33.27 million.

WSDA received few responses to surveys sent to cattlemen and did not estimate damages suffered by beef producers. Poultry losses also were not assessed.

- Farmers in the Wapato Irrigation Project in Yakima County suffered damages totaling \$32.96 million. Most of that, \$20.6 million, was in lost apple production. The Bureau of Indian Affairs manages the district.

- Farmers in the Kittitas Reclamation District in the Kittitas Valley saw damages totaling \$11.4 million, mostly in sharply reduced Timothy hay cuttings. The Roza and Kittitas districts are made up of water-right holders who had their supplies severely curtailed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

- Skagit County farmers suffered economic damages of \$27.2 million, according to an estimate supplied by Washington State University Extension. Farmers grow a wide variety of vegetables, berries and seed crops in the Western Washington county.

- The drought reduced the yield, size and quality of berries. Red raspberry growers suffered \$13.9 million in economic damages, while blueberry growers suffered \$7.76 million in losses, according to WSDA.

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