



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

An almond orchard near Orland, Calif., blooms in early March. Fierce storms in February apparently caused only a moderate disruption in the almond blossom in California, while the cool weather extended the blossom and gave bees more time to work.

Almond blossom 'variable' after storms

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

PALO CEDRO, Calif. — Almond growers in some areas say they had a decent blossom despite several fierce storms in February, as cool weather prolonged the bloom and enabled the bees to finish their work.

The almond blossom was a "variable picture," with orchards that peaked before or after the big Presidents' Day storm setting the best crops, said Bob Curtis, director of agricultural affairs for the Almond Board of California.

Some growers reported variations in crop set within their operations, as some trees fared better than others, he said.

"We definitely do have a crop out there," Curtis said. "The beekeepers have been pleasantly surprised. They thought with all this rain, the pollen and nectar that bees are collecting would be down. Actually as they've gone in and started pulling their hives out of almonds ... they had plenty of pollen and nectar stores. Obviously something was going on out there."

The Palo Cedro, Calif.-based Wooten's Queens and Bees found that their hives were in good shape at the end of the bloom, co-owner Robert Wooten said.

"You could probably say the cold did prolong the bloom," Wooten said. Because the trees did not all bloom at once it was prolonged five or six days, he said.

"If you had a late-blooming variety in my opinion you did well," he said, adding that some of the early varieties also had good pollination.

Almond board to spend \$4.7M for grower efficiency

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

MODESTO, Calif. — The Almond Board of California is continuing an effort to show that growers are good environmental stewards by setting aside \$4.7 million for research into irrigation efficiency, dust reduction and other innovations.

The board plans to fund 82 independently conducted studies into such ideas as improved irrigation systems and catch basins for harvest to reduce dust, said Bob Curtis, the board's director of agricultural affairs.

Many of the grants will go to University of California scientists, who will research such topics as whole-orchard recycling, groundwater recharge in almond orchards and leaf monitoring to assess water stress.

"We're upping our game, so to speak," Curtis told the Capital Press. "One key area is investment in irrigation efficiency, he said. About \$1.3 million is going into irrigation management research.

"There's a lot of new technology coming on line and we want to vet those and get them out to growers," he said, adding that the new machinery would make growers more efficient while being easier to use.

Springtime is key time for winter wheat

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

PENDLETON, Ore. — Morning dew gleamed in the sun Thursday along Duff Road north of Pendleton, where James Harri prepared to scout one of several large wheat fields on his Honda 4-wheeler.

The vehicle is essentially his second office, Harri joked, as he scanned for weeds hidden among rows of young green wheat. It will take him roughly an hour to ride all 314 acres, noting potential trouble spots on a map loaded to his computer tablet.

Winter wheat is finally coming out of dormancy, and the decisions farmers make now will determine the health of the crop leading up to harvest. As a certified crop adviser for the McGregor Co. in Adams, it is Harri's job to be the eyes on the ground and figure out what kind of fertilizer and chemicals are needed for clients to maximize their yield.

High yields are especially important this year, given the global downturn in wheat prices. The crop is currently fetching less than \$5 per bushel in Portland.



Kathy Aney/EO Media Group

James Harri, a certified crop adviser with the MacGregor Co. in Adams, talks with wheat farmers Tom and Don Lieuallen Thursday as they stand near 314 acres of wheat along Duff Road north of Pendleton, Ore.

Diseases like stripe rust and snow mold can easily thwart yields if they are not managed properly, along with invasive weeds that rob moisture and nutrients from the field. That is why springtime is so crucial for growers, Harri said.

"The healthier we can keep these plants earlier in the season, and the cleaner we can keep the field from invasive weeds robbing moisture and nutrients, the better," Harri said.

Unlike the past few years, drought will not be an issue. Harri said Adams recently ex-

perienced its second-wettest February on record, and has received a whopping 15 inches of precipitation since August. Normally, the area receives 16.5 inches during the entire water year.

All that moisture is a blessing for dryland farms, Harri said, but isn't without its own set of challenges. Stripe rust, for example, thrives in cool, soggy environments, and the fungus can cut into wheat yields by 40-80 percent if left untreated.

Harri said he is expecting heavy rust pressure this year,

as well as snow mold, another fungal disease that can flatten wheat stands with sickly patches that resemble spider webs.

"It just feeds on that plant tissue," he said.

As the name suggests, snow mold develops under extensive snow cover that prevents the plant from getting enough air and sunlight. Harri said he expects farmers will start applying fungicide to treat the problem within a week or two.

Farmers like Don and Tom Lieuallen depend on people like Harri to help identify issues early and come up with a quick management plan. By the time they see stripe rust in the field, it is already too late.

"We're talking a potential train wreck," said Don Lieuallen, who runs the farm on Duff Road with Tom, his son.

That being said, Lieuallen added he would rather deal with too much moisture than not enough.

Don Wysocki, an extension soil scientist for Oregon State University in Pendleton, said wheat stands were already well established going into fall and most are still looking good.

"The water year is well above what we've been see-

ing," Wysocki said. "That, to me, is an optimistic outlook."

Tim Watts, regional commercial manager for Monsanto WestBred, said he has also been busy with wheat stand assessments across the Columbia Basin. His clients range from Pendleton and La Grande to Wasco and Madras.

The snow cover isn't all bad, Watts said. Snow can act as an insulator against the cold air and shield from debris in high winds. But like Harri, he advises growers to keep a close watch for diseases early this season.

"Anytime we have a heavy winter, those disease issues tend to be a little more prevalent," Watts said.

In addition, Harri said the abundant moisture has also flushed many nutrients deeper into the soil — in some cases as much as 4 feet down, where the roots of young wheat plants cannot reach them.

Harri recommended the Lieuallens spread additional fertilizer over the topsoil to make up for that deficiency. It may still take a while before things are dry enough to start bringing heavy machinery onto the fields.

Tech company gearing up for harvest interest

Device pays pickers by weight

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

SPOKANE — Agriculture tech company 2nd Sight Bioscience has sold 50 of its automated harvest weighing stations for the coming season.

The Spokane business will build 50 more units next month, some of which are included in that sale, said Monika Cetnarowski, director of business development.

Growers have tested the company's FairPick system in recent seasons. The product is designed to improve labor efficiency, paying pickers by weight and recording the data electronically.

After testing it last year, Mike Omeg, owner of Omeg Family Orchards in The Dalles, Ore., plans to add the equipment to his cherry operation. He previously paid harvesters by the bucket, but challenges arose when monitoring staff would ask for fuller buckets and pickers would say the bucket was full.

"If we move to pay by the pound, it takes all of the tension out of the equation, it keeps the harvest staff doing the picking honest, and it keeps me, doing the paying, honest," Omeg said. "I really like that concept. It's better for everyone involved in the harvest process."

The system records each employee's work in real time, which helps protect Omeg against possible wage complaints. As the technology is proven in various fruit operations, he expects it to be widely adopted.

Omeg is a member of the Capital Press board of directors.

John Raap, chief financial officer for Olsen Brothers Ranches Inc. in Prosser, Wash., will also use 2nd Sight Biosciences Systems.

"There's going to be more technology and efforts toward automating and becoming more efficient," Raap said. "This is certainly a way to do that, bringing technology out to



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Monika Cetnarowski, director of business development for 2nd Sight Bioscience, demonstrates the InstaCaliper, used to help measure and count nursery stock, March 22 in the company's office in Spokane.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Monika Cetnarowski, director of business development for 2nd Sight Bioscience, demonstrates the FairPick automated weighing system March 22 in the company's Spokane office. Roughly 50 of the units were sold for the upcoming harvest season, Cetnarowski said.

the farm, out in the fields. For payroll, it's a beautiful thing."

2nd Sight offers a labor tracking application, FairTrak, which comes on a "ruggedized" hand-held device.

"You can beat it up a little bit," Cetnarowski said. "We've

pushed to have it on a rugged piece of equipment, just because we know in farming environments, you have direct sunlight, heat, moisture, you're going to drop this thing, it's going to be beaten up."

Growers can use the app to

track their labor all year, with data going to the same account, Cetnarowski said.

2nd Sight also offers an electronic caliper device for counting and measuring nursery stock, and is working on yield tracking with me-

Online
<http://www.2ndsightbio.com/>

chanical harvesters.

The company is working with a California tomato grower to design an electronic application to meet that specific harvest process.

Also in the pipeline, 2nd Sight CEO Kevin Oldenburg has discussed a backpack-style blueberry harvester that picks berries gently enough for them to be sold in the fresh market, Cetnarowski said.

The company is also working to adapt its caliper device for rootstock growers.

The company has customers in Washington, Oregon, British Columbia, Ontario, Georgia and Florida.

"We're kind of finding these pockets of growers that are interested and then of course the word spreads from there," Cetnarowski said.

Farmworker housing operations tax credit progresses

Bill moves to Joint Committee on Tax Credits

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM — A proposed tax credit to compensate farmers for half the operational costs of providing worker housing has made some headway in the Oregon Legislature.

Senate Bill 1, which is sup-

ported by a coalition of agriculture and housing groups, has moved out of the Senate Committee on Finance and Revenue. The impacts on Oregon's revenues and budget from SB 1 have yet to be determined.

While the bill will now move to the Joint Committee on Tax Credits, which includes members of both the House and Senate, it was referred out of the committee without recommendation as to its passage.

It's common for the Senate

Committee on Finance and Revenue to move bills without a recommendation at this stage, since various tax credit proposals must still be prioritized, said Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, the committee's chairman.

"We don't want to bias the situation," he said.

The Senate Committee on Finance and Revenue initially voted to move the bill directly to the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, but that recommendation was overrid-

den by Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, who referred it to the Joint Committee on Tax Credits.

If approved by that committee, the bill would move directly to the House floor for a vote.

Bills that reduce state revenues — whether due to expenditures or tax credits — face a particularly tough road during the 2017 legislative session, as Oregon faces a \$1.6 billion budget deficit in the upcoming biennium.

Under Senate Bill 1, farmers would be able to obtain tax credits for half the amount of repairs, maintenance, insurance and other costs associated with farmworker housing during the year.

Utility expenses are also included in these operational costs unless they're paid by workers.

Oregon already has a tax credit for half the costs of building farmworker housing, with an annual cap of \$7.25 million.