

Hermiston waiting on watermelons

Harvest expected by mid-July

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

HERMISTON, Ore. — It's July and that means famous Hermiston watermelons — in all their sweet, juicy glory — are almost back in season.

This year's melon crop may have gotten off to a slow start compared to recent years, but growers say they are making up ground quickly as temperatures have started rising above 90 degrees during the heat of day.

Jack Bellinger, owner of Bellinger Farms, said watermelons fell behind early following a cool and wet spring, which impacted both the timing of planting and limited the number of hot days needed for the plants to absorb energy.

A recent stretch of warmer weather, including a record high of 101 degrees on June 26, has helped to speed things up, Bellinger said. Still, he is looking at beginning harvest July 12-14, which is about a week later than usual.

"The name of the game for all crops is heat units," Bellinger said. "They've been pretty hit and miss."

Patrick Walchli, of Walchli Farms, also figures to push back harvest by a week to 10 days, though he is not alarmed. Weather patterns like this aren't unheard of for the region, Walchli said, and he is not expecting any problems with yield or quality.

"The crop, for the weather we've had at this stage, looks pretty nice," Walchli said. "I expect the melons will be just as good of quality as ever."

Watermelons are an iconic crop for Hermiston, thriving in the region's sandy soils and desert climate. Once summer rolls around, the plants spend all day soaking up the hot sun, which they convert into sugar as a source of energy. Having chilly nights allows the fruit to retain all that sugary goodness.

Hermiston watermelons can be found all over the Northwest, including Portland and Seattle, and have been shipped as far as Maryland and Texas.

Given their immense popularity, it is no surprise that Scott Lukas has chosen to include watermelons as part of his research program at Oregon State University's Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center south of town.

Lukas, who was hired as the station horticulturist last year, is experimenting with



George Plaven/EO Media Group

Scott Lukas, assistant professor of horticulture at Oregon State University, checks on his watermelon trials June 29 at the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Experiment Station.

different treatments for soil-borne Fusarium and Verticillium wilt that can infect watermelon vines, causing them to wither and die.

Most growers use chemical fumigants to keep the diseases in check. For his trial, Lukas is treating the plants with a couple of alternative products that, if successful, could be cheaper and more environmentally friendly than traditional fumigants without impacting yield, he said.

"That's the idea, trying different combinations of green chemistries to solve a common issue this region's watermelon growers face," Lukas said.

It is still too early to measure results, though Lukas is optimistic. The experiment, which involves irrigating roughly 800 watermelon plants, was not launched until late June, and the melons themselves are still no larger than the size of a bean.

Lukas said growers have been cooperative and enthusiastic about the project, which he intends to expand next year over several acres.

"It is using a potentially cheaper product, and one that has less environmental re-

strictions and consequences," he said.

Before hiring Lukas, HAREC was without a horticulturist for about five years. While the station is still primarily known for its work with potatoes, Lukas has made it clear he sees plenty of potential for high-value crop diversification across the Columbia Basin.

"We have affordable land prices. We have plentiful water. We have good soils. And we have good distribution as well, in terms of corridors to ship food out," Lukas said.

Apart from watermelons, Lukas' program also involves projects with onions, blueberries, sweet corn and broccoli. Lukas may eventually look at the possibility of growing tree fruit and nuts around Hermiston, though he said that research is likely a few years away from happening.

Lukas said he is getting good feedback from local growers who previously didn't have a lot of resources available for specialty crops at HAREC.

"I want to do what the growers need," he said. "That's where this program is and where it's going to go."



Courtesy of NORPAC

One of NORPAC's facilities. The cooperative is selling its canning operation to Seneca Foods and emphasizing its frozen vegetables, fruit, soups and other value-added products.

NORPAC sells canning business to Seneca Foods

By **ALIYA HALL**
Capital Press

SALEM — NORPAC Foods has sold its canning business to Seneca Foods Corp.

"In our 93 years as a farmer-owned cooperative, our canning business has been an important part of our history, but over time, it gradually represented a smaller percentage of our overall business," Shawn Campbell, president and CEO of NORPAC, said in a press release. He has been the company's top executive since April.

The canning business represented 6 percent of the company's volume, according to NORPAC spokeswoman Amy Wood.

"The company is now looking at really focusing energy on growth and innovation in the frozen category," she said.

A spokesman for Seneca



Shawn Campbell

ca Foods declined to comment on the purchase.

NORPAC is a cooperative owned by more

than 200 family farmers in the Willamette Valley, and provides frozen vegetables, fruit, soups and other value-added products to the foodservice, retail, club store, remanufacture and export market segments, according to its website.

The June 30 sale will result in the closure of a small Salem beet processing facility and the consolidation of the Hermiston, Ore., facility with the Brooks, Ore., and Quincy, Wash., operations. In 2018 the plants in Brooks and Stayton, Ore., will be redesigned to accommodate

more frozen vegetable processing.

NORPAC will continue manufacturing other products for Seneca through late 2017.

"The transition away from our canning business and the closure of our Hermiston processing facility will help us drive efficiencies and reduce operational complexities as we invest in continued growth and innovation in our frozen product lines," Campbell said.

In April, Seneca also acquired the remaining 50 percent ownership of Truitt Bros. Inc. from David Truitt, making the Salem-based company a wholly owned subsidiary. Truitt Bros. also has an operation in East Bernstadt, Ky.

Seneca Foods is the leading provider of packaged fruits and vegetables in North America.



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