

Washington Strawberry Commission may disband

Chairman says he's 'dumbfounded' by lack of interest

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Fittingly, no one from the strawberry industry came to a public hearing Tuesday at the Department of Agriculture on whether to disband the Washington Strawberry Commission.

The commission's chairman, Lacey berry grower Tim Spooner, said in a phone interview afterward that the hearing typified the lack of interest in the commission.

"It's just like when nobody shows up for the commission meetings," he said. "When you don't get participation and involvement, it's very tough."

The commission, which has four vacancies on its eight-member board, asked WSDA in April to terminate it and the half-cent per pound assessment paid by growers.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press File

The Washington Strawberry Commission, which has four vacancies on its eight-member board, asked WSDA in April to terminate it and the half-cent per pound assessment paid by growers.

The commission's revenue has dropped sharply in the past 15 years, along with the acres of strawberries planted in the state.

The commission in 2016 collected \$36,144 from 35 growers, less than one-third

the amount raised 15 years ago. Over the same period, harvested strawberry acres have fallen to 900 acres from 1,800 acres, according to the USDA.

"A lot of it boils down to labor, labor costs," Spooner

said. "Labor is getting scary at times."

The commission has never funded marketing, but it does fund research in Washington, Oregon and British Columbia. After administrative expenses, the commission has about \$20,000 to distribute, Spooner said.

The commission's part-time manager, Walter Swenson, said he isn't thrilled about the thought of taking another pay cut. "I don't think the industry is going to die, but I'm not sure of the need for the commission," he said.

WSDA Director Derek Sandison will decide whether to put the commission's proposal to disband to a binding vote by growers.

WSDA commodity commissions manager Teresa Norman said the department would like to help re-energize the commission. She said that she's concerned that some strawberry farmers aren't attuned to the benefits of a commission.

"It makes me wonder if they even know what a fine,

functioning commission is really like," she said. "My worry is we're not really reaching everybody."

WSDA also has concerns about how the commission is managed.

The commission approached WSDA last winter about making every board position at-large. The idea was to eliminate districts and make filling vacancies easier.

WSDA officials told the commission that it would first need to comply with a long list of state rules, such as holding at least two meetings a year and following state-approved bookkeeping procedures.

"I think it would take less than a week to comply with all the requirements," Norman said.

Spooner said the commission can get its business done in one meeting a year, and it's tough enough to get a quorum for one, let alone two meetings. He said WSDA does a "wonderful job" supporting commissions, but added that there are a lot of requirements put

on volunteer board members.

"They make it pretty complicated now in running a commission," he said.

The breaking point, according to Swenson, came when the board dropped to four members — one fewer than demanded by state law.

Spooner said that he's been chairman for about 20 years and has tried in vain to get more growers interested in the commission. He drafted his nephew, Puyallup farmer Sam Spooner, to fill one board position. Another board position is filled by WSDA's representative, Tobin Gilbert, who works in the department's plant protection division.

"We just don't get any interest. It dumbfounds me," Tim Spooner said.

He said he started viewing the commission as a "dying quail" a few years ago when growers badly defeated a proposal to raise the assessment to a penny per pound. Only a small minority even bothered to vote, he said.

"I was seeing where this thing was going," he said.

PNW cherry crop will likely set a record

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — The Pacific Northwest fresh cherry crop is half harvested and now estimated as the largest in history.

In May, it was forecast at 22.7 million, 20-pound boxes but the consensus was it could easily be larger. In late June, Northwest Cherry Growers, the industry's promotional arm in Yakima, updated the estimate to 24.5 million boxes. If reached, it will surpass the record crop of 23.4 million in 2014.

"I definitely do think we will hit that," B.J. Thurlby, Northwest Cherry Growers president, said of the new number.

There was a time when that many cherries would strike fear in shippers and marketers because packing houses were not equipped to handle large volumes quickly.

That's no longer a problem with high-speed, electronic sizer-sorters used in most packing houses, producing more consistent high quality.

"We can run it all fast and have great packouts but the challenge is changing packaging," Thurlby said. "We've gained time away from hand sorting but lost it on packaging a little."

There are different sizes of clamshells and bags and



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

A limited amount of hand sorting still occurs on Columbia Fruit Packers' new high-tech, high-speed cherry line in Wenatchee, Wash., on June 20. A proliferation of such lines in the last three years is helping the industry handle what's likely to end up as a record large crop this season.

different labels and production managers are "logistical geniuses" to keep it all going, he said.

As of July 10, 12.5 million boxes had been shipped and shipments averaged 546,000 boxes per day for the 10 days leading up through July 7, Thurlby said. Those are record shipments for that time of year. A new single-day shipment record of 682,000 boxes was set on June 26, likely the season peak, he said.

Sales volume was better than expected through the Fourth of July but could have been better, he said. The holiday is a key sales time.

With the crop being later

this year, 7.8 million boxes were sold in June versus a record 12.3 million last June, 11.9 million in June 2015 and 9.9 million in 2014.

Weather has been excellent, perhaps the best in recent memory with no crop-damaging rain or prolonged hot streaks.

"The hot days we have had have been followed by cool nights which is ideal because it brings on the sugar," said Tom Riggan, general manager of Chelan Fresh Marketing in Chelan, Wash.

Warm days and cool nights maintain harvest spread between the varieties, which is good, Thurlby said.

The only negative seems to be too much small fruit pressuring prices downward.

"Prices are not good and

packouts are tough. There's a lot of small fruit," said Josh Koempel, a Peshastin, Wash., grower.

Charles Lyall, a Mattawa grower, echoed that, saying Rainier prices were OK but that red cherry prices were not holding well because there's just so many of them.

"Word is out that many packers have quit packing 12-row size. They are going to processing or not being picked," Riggan said.

Cherries are sized by the number of cherries that fit in one row of a 20-pound box.

Early Chelan and Santina varieties and Bing were about a size smaller than last year but Canadian varieties, Lapin and Skeena, which are now being harvested, are larger, Riggan said.

Blue-green algae bloom kills 32 cattle in S. Oregon

By ALIYA HALL
Capital Press

A blue-green algae outbreak in a Lake County, Ore., reservoir has killed 32 head of cattle.

The outbreak began on KV Bar Ranch about June 12. John Shine, owner of the south-central Oregon ranch, said the steers "just started dying." That afternoon 11 died, and the rest followed within 72 hours. Although Shine is the ranch owner, the cattle lost belonged to another rancher.

"We had a reservoir that cattle have been drinking out of for 60 years, and never had a problem. Then this breeze comes from the north and carried this layer of scum 3 to 4 feet from the edge and that's what they were drinking. We noticed the cattle had blue legs," Shine said. "We thought it was poison at first. We didn't know what it was."

The color and the smell were the most noticeable things to Shine.

"It's a turquoise color; it's not green," he said. "It smelled like rotten seaweed at the ocean."

Despite the name, blue-green algae are actually bacteria. It occurs naturally in many fresh and still waters, and is recognizable by a collection of surface scum that "looks like a green paint spill," said Dr. Rod Ferry, a veterinarian at Lakeview Animal Hospital. Although some blue-green algae species are harmless, others produce a toxin that in large doses can affect the liver or the nervous system. The toxin can affect both animals and people.

"It's unusual to lose 32 (cattle) in one hit," said Theo Dreher, a microbiology professor at Oregon State University. "It's probably not infrequent in cases of ranch land cattle where a few stock die, but this is pretty exceptional, and points out the danger that does exist when you get one of these blooms."

They suspect that the bloom formed because of Oregon's increased rainwater this winter and spring, after several years of drought. During that time excess manure may have washed into tanks, ponds or reservoirs, which caused an increased nutrient load for the algae to feed on and grow, creating the bloom, Pete Schreder, OSU Extension livestock agent, said in an email.

Wind can also help aggregate the clumps of algae.

For producers, losing 32 head "is relatively devastating," Schreder said.

After they eat the toxin, cattle will quit eating, stagger or be unable to rise after lying on the ground. Eventually, they will go into a coma and die. Death can come up to 72 hours after initial exposure.

"There is no treatment available. It's pretty impractical to treat cattle with a lethal dose because it just can't save



Courtesy of Kansas State University

A blue-green algae bloom in a Lake County, Ore., reservoir killed 32 cattle. Not all blooms are toxic, and ranchers and others should report any outbreaks so they can be tested.

them," Ferry said.

Ranchers should be diligent and check all water sources for anything atypical. If they see anything suspicious, keep livestock away from the water and call the local OSU Extension office.

This is the first reported case of blue-green algae in Lake County, Schreder and Ferry said.

"I've been here for 30 years and haven't seen it in this county to this degree," Ferry said. "It's not something experienced here."

There have been other sightings of blue-green algae in Oregon, according to Dreher, the microbiology professor. Toxic species have been found in the South Umpqua River, Detroit Lake, Upper Klamath Lake, South Tensile Lake and areas of Lake Billy Chinook, according to the Oregon Health Authority's algae bloom advisories website.

While some algacides are available to treat smaller ponds, they are temporary and costly. Any chemical treatments will affect too many other natural systems in the water, and would not be feasible, Schreder and Dreher said.

"We really just have to let it run its course. It grows and blooms, and then dissipates over time," Schreder said.

Dreher estimated that the dissipation period can last a couple of weeks.

"In a small reservoir many things can happen. The bacteria can die off and be eaten by other organisms and bacteria, or it could settle out on the sediment under the water and stop growing or it can be disrupted by currents and wind until the concentration lowers," Dreher said.

Dreher also reminds producers to be aware of the algae if they're irrigating their pastures, as that might cause further exposure problems.

After a bloom has formed once in a reservoir or pond it can be more susceptible in the future.

"All water has the capability, but it happens when the stars align just right," Schreder said. "We're looking into the summer and can't predict if we're going to have more blooms; we just have to watch and see. We want to alert people to be diligent and keep an eye out on ponds and reservoirs this year."

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