

Washington

Co-ops give mixed reviews on DOL inspections

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

CHELAN, Wash. — U.S. Department of Labor surprise audits of Chelan Fruit Cooperative, its manager and several board members and growers apparently are turning out relatively well with only minor infractions and fines expected.

But the manager of neighboring Manson Fruit Cooperative, Doug England, said Chelan Fruit may see things differently when it gets the citations and fines.

Manson Fruit was audited more than a year before Chelan Fruit and inspectors left indicating only minor infractions were found, England said.

A couple months later, Manson Fruit and growers received notices and fines for small things that growers paid but the cooperative appealed several on principle, England said.

“We were cited for not prominently displaying a required work poster because one worker said she didn’t see it even though everyone else saw it and it was prominently displayed,” England said.



Workers pre-sort cherries on Chelan Fruit Cooperative’s packing line. The co-op was recently the subject of a Department of Labor inspection.

“We were cited for not physically presenting workers with a proposed contract when hiring them even though they were in California and we were in Washington,” he said.

DOL also classified some of the co-op’s workers as migrants even though they were full-time local residents, and had been for years, he said. That put the co-op into a different level of review, he said.

“Our fine was under \$2,000. Growers had similar

fines and paid theirs because they didn’t want to fight, but we appealed ours (within DOL) on a matter of principle,” England said.

It’s been months and he’s heard no response to the appeal, he said.

Jose Carnevali, a DOL spokesman in San Francisco, said the matter is ongoing and that he can’t provide information.

“They showed up out of the blue and went through

all our payroll and found no problems. The sign posting is bogus. The only thing legitimate was no screen door,” England said.

“They demanded our grower list and hit all our board members for extremely minor things,” he said.

In July, Dan McCarthy, president of Okanogan Horticultural Association and a Tonasket grower, said DOL was auditing growers in Tonasket, Omak, Okanogan



Doug England



Reggie Collins

and Pateros and that growers were concerned.

DOL audits in Okanogan County several years ago resulted in “frivolous citations and hefty fines” without due process, he said. Growers were all but threatened to sign admissions of violations without knowing what they were specifically, he said.

The growers audited this year in Tonasket, Omak, Okanogan and Pateros were all Chelan Fruit Cooperative members, McCarthy said.

“The inspectors stormed into town and blew out and after that I haven’t heard anything. No news is good news,” McCarthy said.

Reggie Collins, general manager of Chelan Fruit Cooperative, said he, the cooperative and three of four other board members were audited starting in May and into July.

It was the first time the co-

op had been audited by DOL in at least 17 years, he said.

“Everyone had little issues. Things on housing like screens (missing) on windows and doors and batteries in smoke detectors, but no real surprises or major fines. Everyone thought they (DOL) handled themselves professionally and it turned out OK,” Collins said.

There were also issues with formatting of payroll, and no one escaped without some infractions and fines, the dollar amount of which they do not yet know, he said.

The inspectors did not seem overly aggressive or agenda-driven, he said. Dan Fazio, executive director of the farm labor association WAFLA, said some of the growers audited were WAFLA members and that WAFLA gave general advice and that he believes all audit findings were minor.

Fazio said he felt it inappropriate that DOL auditors asked Chelan Fruit for names of its members and that he advised the cooperative not to comply.

Collins said the co-op’s attorney thought it best to comply, so he did.

Farm Bureau urges cap on elk

Herd expanding onto farmland

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

The Washington Farm Bureau proposes capping the number of elk in two northwest Washington valleys, where farmers and ranchers say the growing North Cascades herd is damaging crops and fences, and making driving rural highways hazardous.

Farm Bureau director of government relations Tom Davis said a maximum number would protect property and motorists, goals the Department of Fish and Wildlife says it shares.

“A limit would be the most transparent way to manage the herd and hold the department accountable,” Davis said. “We would prefer zero, but we know we can’t get there. But let’s pick a number, or a range, and argue over that.”

An estimated 200 to 400 elk have migrated over the past half dozen years into the Skagit River and Acme valleys in Skagit and Whatcom counties. Previously, the valleys were outside the herd’s territory, but WDFW and tribes curbed hunting and trucked in elk from southwest Washington more than a decade ago and succeeded in spurring population growth.

The state estimates the herd has about 1,200 elk, without counting the elk in the two valleys. The state’s goal is to have 1,950 elk in the herd.

WDFW is updating its plan



Courtesy of Randy Good

Elk blood splatters Highway 20 in this photo taken July 4 in Skagit County in northwest Washington. State wildlife managers say they want to reduce elk-vehicle collisions and crop damage by elk in the area. The Farm Bureau proposes limiting the number of elk.

to manage the herd, providing another forum for frustrated farmers and ranchers to suggest the state rein in its elk. Separately, lawmakers have directed WDFW to come up with a plan to reduce farmer complaints and highway collisions.

So far, WDFW has proposed relying on hunting and hazing to drive elk from the valley, but has not committed to reducing the population to a certain number.

According to the Farm Bureau, WDFW should back up its intentions with a population cap. If WDFW relies on counting complaints to measure success, it will be hard to know whether farmers just decided it wasn’t worth the hassle of putting in a claim, Davis said. “It’s like filing your taxes. Nobody likes that paperwork.”

WDFW district biologist Fenner Yarborough said the department will consider the Farm Bureau’s position.

“I think it’s absolutely something to look at,” he said.

Yarborough cautioned, however, that elk are hard to count, populations vary by season and some people want more elk in the valleys.

“It’s a tough one,” he said. “We’re trying to find a middle ground.”

Skagit County Cattlemen’s Association Vice President Randy Good said that he stopped raising cattle in a 40-acre pasture bordering Highway 20 because elk were crashing through the electric fence. A sturdier fence would have been expensive and would shift the problem to a neighbor, he said.

He estimated that nine to 12 elk a year are hit by vehicles along a three-quarters-mile stretch of highway along his land. Sometimes the injured elk make it to his field before dying, and he has to bury them. He said he’s also concerned about elk spreading disease.

Alfalfa seed farmers see average, profitable year

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

TOUCHET, Wash. — Otis Garbe isn’t quite sure what he did to get one of his top alfalfa seed harvests this year.

“For me, I’m going, ‘What did I do this last year?’ so I can repeat it again this year,” the Touchet, Wash., farmer said.

Garbe credits a long winter, good moisture, low insect populations and weather that helped the alkali bees that help pollinate the crop.

“I don’t know if you want to call it a perfect storm for the seed crop, but everything hit

for us,” he said.

Most of the 55 to 60 farms raising alfalfa seed experienced an average year after several challenges in recent harvests, said Shane Johnson, executive director of the state Alfalfa Seed Commission.

He estimates 14 million pounds of seed will be produced this year, up from 11 million pounds last year.

Garbe raises alfalfa seed on roughly 200 of his own acres and 50 leased acres about 20 miles outside Walla Walla. He started harvest Aug. 19 and expected to finish Sept. 8-9.

Garbe anticipates an aver-

age yield of more than 1,000 pounds per acre. The price he receives under a three-year contract averages about \$2.15 per pound for clean seed. He has to factor in the cost of equipment, power for handline irrigation, chemicals and using leafcutter bees as a pollinator, he said.

Garbe does the bulk of labor himself, although he’ll hire a worker if he gets in a pinch.

Johnson believes alfalfa seed farmers are relatively profitable under the contracts.

Farmers raise proprietary varieties under contract to seed companies.

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