



GROWING WORRIES

A busy apple loading zone at CRO Orchard, Rock Island, Wash., Oct. 4. Buses transport workers, mostly H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers, who pick fruit in the 900-acre orchard.

From the lack of immigration reform and worker shortages to the Food Safety Modernization Act, tree fruit growers worry about their future.

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — As Washington’s apple industry wraps up another harvest, growers and packers are becoming increasingly concerned about rising labor costs and many other issues that threaten their competitiveness.



Susana Flores picks Gala apples in an East Wenatchee, Wash., orchard on Aug. 28.

Chief among the challenges is a chronic shortage of workers that has pushed the cost of labor skyward. But costs could increase even more if the state Supreme Court sides with farmworker advocates in a lawsuit that could eliminate piece-rate pay in agriculture. Another lawsuit, against a Yakima Valley dairy, seeks to overturn the state law exempting farm work from overtime pay. “If piece-rate and our overtime exemption go away and harvest costs take another 50 percent jump, where does it all lead?” asks one company executive. The whole industry has a commodity-driven pricing model and it will take “huge capital investment” in mechanization and robotics to remain competitive, said the executive, who requested anonymity. “The piece-rate case is one factor in a whole constellation of potential changes and issues and long-term trends that’s convinced growers that labor cost and supply are one of the biggest challenges we face as tree fruit producers,” said Jon DeVaney,

Turn to **WORRIES**, Page 12

Grower concerns

• PIECE-RATE PAY

Perhaps the biggest challenge is to piece-rate pay, a cornerstone of agricultural labor economics.

• UNIONIZATION

Growers and packers worry unionization will increase costs and reduce their flexibility in handling labor needs.

• MECHANIZATION COSTS

An unintended consequence of unionization and more government regulations is they push employers to seek greater mechanization at the expense of jobs.

• WORRIES INTENSIFY

Washington growers have long dominated U.S. apple production and are increasingly recognized worldwide for their high-quality apples. But they’re not the lowest-cost producers.



Photos by Dan Wheat/Capital Press
A tractor pushes four bins of Granny Smith apples toward truck loading Oct. 4 at CRO Orchard, Rock Island, Wash.



Aliya Hall/Capital Press

The amount of frozen blueberries in U.S. cold storage has dropped 20 percent since last autumn.

U.S. supplies of frozen berries plunge

Price impacts from lower inventories are uneven

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Supplies of frozen blueberries and blackberries in the U.S. have plunged since last year, but the price impacts for the two crops

have been uneven.

The amount of frozen blueberries in U.S. cold storage has dropped 20 percent since last autumn, from 332 million pounds to 266 million pounds, according to USDA.

Weather problems across the U.S. reduced

yields, but blueberry quality was good enough for about 60 percent of the crop to go into the fresh market, said Rod Cook, president of Ag-View Consulting, which tracks the market.

Usually, roughly half the blueberry crop goes into cold storage while the other half is sold fresh, he said.

Turn to **BERRIES**, Page 12

Willamette Valley farmers will face water challenges

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

By the turn of the century, farmers in Oregon’s Willamette Valley will be planting earlier and will begin irrigating about two weeks sooner than they do now, according to an Oregon State University study that used computer modeling to project water availability, demand and storage in the Willamette River basin to the year 2100.

Climate change most likely will result in wetter winters, but with the snowpack severely reduced and earlier runoff. Rainy winters and springs will be followed by hotter and drier summers, but more farmers will have finished irrigating by the time water shutoffs are contemplated, the research team concluded. Although the reduced snowpack will cause the loss of an estimated 600,000 acre-feet of stored water, it won’t have a significant impact on farmers in the

Willamette River basin who rely on rain-fed streams. Farmers in the more arid Eastern Oregon and Deschutes and Klamath basins, however, depend more on melting snow for irrigation water and are more likely to face shortages.

Willamette Valley cities will need more water to accommodate population growth, but other factors reduce the impact of that increased demand.

Turn to **WATER**, Page 12



Capital Press file photo

An irrigation intake pipe draws water from the Willamette River in this file photo. A study by Oregon State University examines water supply and demand in the basin by the year 2100.



7 29467 70125 0



LANE
FOREST PRODUCTS
The company to grow with

KEEP STORMWATER CLEAN WITH
WATER QUALITY
GROW MIX

(888) 345-9085 | laneforest.com | LCB# 7762

