

East Idaho young farmers pool knowledge through group texts

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

SODA SPRINGS, Idaho — When Dan Lahey is stumped about how to handle a problem in one of his fields, he sends a group text message to several other young farmers in the area.

For example, there were the mysterious caterpillars he discovered last June feeding on Canadian thistles. In response to a picture he sent with his text, another young farmer, Eli Hubbard, identified them as painted lady caterpillars, informing Lahey they were beneficial and would eat only weeds.

Lahey and about six others who participate in the group texts reason the next generation of farmers faces a great challenge in adapting their operations to new technology and the latest trends in improving farm sustainability. So for the past few years,



John O'Connell/Capital Press

Dan Lahey, of Soda Springs, Idaho, gives a demonstration about soil health, and how the use of no-till farming and cover crops can reduce water erosion, during a forum hosted at his friend Cody Cole's farm last summer. Lahey and Cole are members of an informal group of young farmers who provide each other guidance — especially on soil-health matters — by sending group text messages or visiting each other's fields.

they've been working together and pooling their knowledge to find an advantage.

"We share articles or videos or things we see in our

fields," said group member Jake Ozburn.

They also meet regularly for breakfast and frequently assess each other's fields. Oz-

burn, for example, showed the group crop damage caused by army worms and brown wheat mites to familiarize them with the symptoms.

"We'd just load up into trucks about once a month, and we'd look at different fields and different equipment we would use," added 30-year-old Cody Cole. "Somebody would see something that the others wouldn't see."

Improving soil health has emerged as the central theme. They've acquired compaction meters, penetrometers and other devices to assess soil traits during their field trips, but Lahey insists the simplest tool is still the best — a shovel. For Christmas, he bought family and friends shovels for digging in fields and assessing soil and root structure.

"I'll admit, five years ago we would drive by all of our fields and maybe walk around the edge, but I never got out and dug in the soil," Cole said.

"Once we started these crop tours, it was like, 'Wow, I've probably left a lot on the table because I haven't done this.'"

The collaboration traces back to 2012, when Lahey and Ozburn began consulting one another. A couple of years later, Cole joined their discussions. The text group has further expanded during the past two seasons, and now includes a Delta, Utah, grower who frequently lectures on soil health.

Lahey is the group's risk taker, having eliminated tillage on much of his farm and substituted a machine that stimulates soil microbe activity with tractor exhaust, in lieu of fertilizer, on half of his acres.

Cole has made calculated changes, planting a series of test plots this summer to evaluate cover crop blends for cattle forage and soil-health benefits under his region's

dryland conditions.

Ozburn considers himself to be the "hardest to convince on newer ideas."

"When we try stuff, we try it on a smaller scale," Ozburn said. "Dan is the go-big kind of guy."

By sharing knowledge of the experiments they're conducting across their collective acres, Lahey believes he and his friends stand to discover best farming practices much faster.

"One thing I've learned is there's no right way to do it, and everybody farms differently," Lahey said.

Holly Rippon-Butler, with the New York-based National Young Farmers Coalition, sees a trend of young farmers around the country using modern technology to network and share information.

"They are really yearning to find ways they can create community in these rural areas," she said.

Summer heat, pleasant autumn spur plentiful pumpkin crop

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

ANDERSON, Calif. — Pumpkin farms in California report some of the best yields in memory as pleasant weather this fall has brought scores of tourists to enjoy their attractions.

At Hawes Farms in Anderson, grower Greg Hawes is marveling at what he says is the best crop he's seen in about a dozen years.

"It just really looks good," said Hawes, noting that sizes and overall quality have improved from recent years. "Most of my other stuff like my grains didn't do well, but the pumpkins are beautiful. Maybe they like the extra heat."

Wayne Bishop, owner of Bishop's Pumpkin Farm, thinks so, too. Heat waves this summer delayed crop set a bit, which worried him in August and September, he said.

But the crop turned out plentiful, and the temperatures in the 70s and 80s during October brought in big crowds, he said.

"It's been a wonderful season," Bishop said. "I don't ever remember weather any better than we've had this fall."

The season's only blemish was a light rainstorm on Oct. 19-20, but such little rain was more of a help to unpicked pumpkins than a hindrance.

"It's nice to give them a little shot in the arm," said Carl Hawkins, general manager of Hawes Farms. He added that mold and rot weren't a concern.

"We have some clear skies coming through, and next week it's supposed to get back up into the 90s," he said Oct. 20.

The big yields and relatively warm weather should help pumpkin patches meet what is certain to be a high demand in the days leading up to Halloween.

This year's conditions were just right after several years in which weather complicated pumpkin season in one way or another. Last year, crews rushed to harvest as many pumpkins as possible in early October before anticipated rains came, eventually breaking records for the month in some areas.

In 2015, hot weather lingered into October, keeping



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Carl Hawkins, general manager of Hawes Farms in Anderson, Calif., takes a break from checking pumpkins after a storm passed over the area early Oct. 20. The farm is seeing some of its best pumpkin yields in years.

people busy with summertime activities and stifling attendance, Bishop said.

"People need to know that it's fall and not summer anymore," he said. "When it's up in the 90s, people are not thinking about getting pumpkins."

And in 2014, a storm that dumped nearly 3 inches of rain in the northern Sacramento Valley in late September caused Hawes Farms to lose between 5 and 10 percent of its pumpkins to rot.

California's abundance comes as retailers in some areas of the country are reporting a pumpkin shortage, largely because of hurricane and storm damage in Florida and Texas, CNBC reported.

Home Depot, which usually sells about 1.5 million pumpkins per year, isn't stocking as many this year, the network reported.

However, demand for pumpkins has also waned this year as residents in hurricane-impacted areas focus on

essentials.

"When you have a natural disaster, it changes everybody's priorities," C. Britt Beemer, a retail analyst with America's Research Group in Orlando, Fla., told CNBC.

Nationwide, the retail price of pumpkins has averaged \$3.89 apiece, down from \$3.95 a year ago, reported the USDA's National Retail Report for specialty crops.

The per-pound average on Oct. 20 was 33 cents, down from 46 cents the week before and 89 cents a year ago, according to the USDA.

In a typical year, nearly 6,000 acres of pumpkins are grown in California, one of the nation's top six pumpkin-producing states. Most are planted in May or June for the Halloween season, according to the University of California Cooperative Extension.

Most of the pumpkins grown in California are sold in the state, the California Farm Bureau Federation reported.

Lebanon livestock auction celebrates 30th anniversary

By ALIYA HALL
Capital Press

LEBANON, Ore. — Coy Cowart lasted about a year in retirement before he became bored of fishing and hiking and decided he wanted to go back to work.

Having initially worked in construction, Coy Cowart and his wife, Helen, wanted a business. In 1987 they purchased the Lebanon Auction Yard, where Helen Cowart had worked 25 years before.

"We work for fun," Helen Cowart, 81, said. "Some people never work, and then there's people like us."

Although Helen and Coy Cowart, 83, still attend auctions, the yard is now run by their son, Terry, 57, and his wife, Lezlie, 54. Terry Cowart is the auctioneer, the fourth that the yard has had.

On Thursday, Oct. 19, the Cowart family celebrated the 30th anniversary by auctioning off 741 head of cattle. Helen Cowart laughed when she said the date only means that she and Coy were getting old.

The anniversary also marked the retirement of Claude Swanson, who has worked at the auction for the full 30 years. Helen Cowart said she approached Swanson because he was knowledgeable about sheep, but he also worked in the ring and sorted cattle.

"The family has known him forever," Lezlie Cowart said. "He's a pretty cool old (guy) with a wealth of information. Claude's never met a stranger."

Swanson, 83, said it was a good time to retire because he is going through chemotherapy treatments for prostate cancer. "I wouldn't quit



Aliya Hall/For the Capital Press

Helen and Coy Cowart bought the Lebanon Auction Yard in 1987. Coy Cowart said that he assumes the grandchildren will eventually take over the business and keep it in the family.

if it wasn't for this cancer," he said.

Swanson's knowledge has left an imprint on the community that regularly attends the auction. He said that people have asked his opinion on the animals, especially sheep, which are his expertise.

But the auction yard means more than animals. Swanson and Helen and Lezlie Cowart agree the camaraderie with the customers is most rewarding.

"To me, it's an awful lot of work, but there's also a lot of pride to have the same customers and a fairly large business," Lezlie Cowart said.

Even through the auction yard's tough times the customers have remained loyal. In 1993, the building burned down, but customers and members of the community volunteered time and money to help the Cowarts rebuild. They put up a tent and didn't cancel the auction.

"The fire just about broke us," Coy Cowart said, but the response of the customers "makes the heart feel good."

Along with the auction, Coy and Helen Cowart created a cattle-holding equipment business, and own three semi-trucks to haul cattle.

Although the number of cattle varies depending on the week, Helen Cowart estimated that it averages 200 to 600 head. The auction is held every Thursday, except Thanksgiving, at 1 p.m.

The biggest challenge facing the auction yard is labor, Lezlie Cowart said, because few people want to do it and she can't do it by herself. Although plenty of children are around, they're too young to control the animals, she said.

Coy Cowart said he assumes the grandchildren will eventually take over the business, and he wants it to be that way. Already his two-year-old great grandson, Henry, can tell every cow apart. He learned Holstein first, Coy Cowart said.

He said that he's fortunate to be surrounded by family, and it feels good when people want to be around him.

"God's first, then family, and then business," Coy Cowart said.

Don't miss the opportunity to attend one of the largest weed control & management meetings in the US on November 1-3, 2017 at Wenatchee Convention Center!
Topics cover crops of all kinds, turf & ornamental, vegetation management & aquatics.

November 1-3, 2017
weed CONFERENCE
Washington State Weed Association
Wenatchee Convention Center

Contact the Washington State Weed Association at 509.288.4677 or info@weedconference.org
Register online at www.weedconference.org

14 Recertification Credits applied for through WSDA, Oregon and Idaho!

The cost is \$125 per person.

2017 Featured Speaker: Dr. Dean Pearson
Dr. Pearson will present on Climate Change & how it effects vegetation & land managers. He is a research ecologist at the Rocky Mountain Research Station, USDA Forest Service. He's authored over 50 publications and has received several honors including the National Forest System Invasive Species Program Award for Landscape Restoration & Rehabilitation Against Invasive Species.

43-3/101

WESTERN PACKAGING
Your Future is Our Future...

WE SPECIALIZE IN BULK BAGS!

BAGS:

- Seed Bags
- Fertilizer Bags
- Feed Bags
- Potato Bags
- Printed Bags
- Plain Bags
- Bulk Bags
- Totes
- Woven Polypropylene
- Bopp
- Polyethylene
- Pocket Bags
- Roll Stock & More!

HAY PRESS SUPPORT:

- Hay Sleeves
- Strap
- Totes
- Printed or Plain
- Stretch Film
- (ALL GAUGES)

WAREHOUSE PACKAGING:

- Stretch Film
- Pallet Sheets
- Pallet Covers

LOCATIONS:

Albany, Oregon (MAIN OFFICE)
Ellensburg, Washington

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Phone: 855-928-3856
Fax: 541-497-6262
info@westernpackaging.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE IS OUR TOP PRIORITY!

www.westernpackaging.com

43-3/100