Ambrosia apples make their mark

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Guadalupe Morales packs Ambrosia apples in a two-layer Euro box at the McDougall & Sons Baker Flats packing plant near East Wenatchee, Wash. Most are sold domestically, though some are shipped overseas.

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Ambrosia is one of the oldest proprietary apple varieties grown in Washington state — and the first to have enough volume to garner its own listing in monthly industry storage reports.

Until November, it was listed in the "other" category by the Washington State Tree Fruit Association along with numerous other managed varieties or varieties that sell in small volumes. In November, Ambrosia was listed by itself at an estimated 1.5 million, 40-pound boxes.

Braeburn was at 1.15 million boxes that month, and Jonagold was at 500,000. "Others" were at 5.6 million boxes, and seven varieties were at 5.7 million boxes and greater, led by Red Delicious at 33.5 million and Gala at 33.4 million. Granny Smith was at 18.9 million, Fuji 17.4 million and Honeycrisp 12.4 million.

Ambrosia was a chance seedling discovered in the mid-1980s by Wilfred and Sally Mennell in their Similkameen Valley, Keremeos, B.C., orchard about 30 miles north of the U.S.-Canada border. It's believed to be the offspring of Golden Delicious and either Jonagold or Starking Delicious.

McDougall & Sons Inc., of Wenatchee, responded to a request for proposals from a Canadian company, now Summerland Varieties Council, in 2005 and received proprietary rights to grow, pack and sell the fruit in North America with certain times of the year for export into certain countries. Companies in Italy, Chile, New Zealand and Australia also received domestic rights and export rights into certain countries at specific times.

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Ambrosia apples at the McDougall & Sons Baker Flats packing plant, near East Wenatchee, Wash. Beautiful in color, the apples also have a honey-like flavor.

"It's our No. 1 apple that we pack. The franchise has proven to be a profitable part of our business for sure," said Scott McDougall, president of McDougall & Sons.

Ambrosia has come down in price as it gained in volume but is still wholesaling this year at close to $40 per box, he said.

As of Feb. 9, USDA tracking of average asking prices among Yakima and Wenatchee shippers for extra fancy (standard grade) medium size 80 and 88 apples per packed box was $13 to $15 for Red Delicious, $20 to $25 for Gala and $58 to $64 on premium 80s Honeycrisp.

"It's a great apple. Cosmetically, it's one of the prettiest apples, a very beautiful bi-color of red and golden background," McDougall said. "It has a sweet, unique, honey-like flavor with a hint of a snap."

Other newer managed varieties have more snap, a touch of tart on top of sweet. That's created by a higher ratio of acidity to sugar. "Ambrosia basically has no acid. It fits well in your stomach," McDougall said.

But acidity increases storability and density and gives apples a crunch when you bite into them.

Ambrosia needs to be raised at elevations higher that 1,400 feet for the best coloring, McDougall said, declining to disclose the acreage.

"People think it's a no-brainer apple. But it's one of the most difficult to manage from a harvest standpoint," he said. "It ripens very quickly and harvest timing has to be exact for it to store well."

It requires several color picks within a narrow window of about five days around Sept. 20, he said.

Color and starch levels are the best indicators of when to pick. Managers cut open apples and use an iodine test to determine how rapidly starch is disappearing.

"We have to have a large labor force to pick it in the proper amount of time," he said. "If you don't get it just right, it won't store."

To that end, McDougall & Sons has increasingly turned to hiring H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers in recent years for enough dependable labor.

Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

A log loader competition at the Oregon Logging Conference in Eugene. Among the presentations was one on forestry rules.

Study shows Oregon landowners overwhelmingly follow forestry rules

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Oregon's forestland owners are overwhelmingly following regulations aimed at managing and harvesting timber, though they've fallen short on some counts, state regulators found.

Landowners had a compliance rate of 97 percent with 57 key rules related to logging, road building and water protection under the Oregon Forest Practices Act, according to a study by the Oregon Department of Forestry.

For example, the timber industry strictly avoids removing vegetation along streams during harvests.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time, we get it right," said Paul Clements, ODFA's training and compliance coordinator, during the Oregon Logging Conference Feb. 23 in Eugene, Ore.

Most of the impacts from non-compliance were minor, but there were certain rules where the timber industry had room for improvement, he said.

Minimizing the amount of waste slash in waters of the state had a compliance rate of 76 percent, Clements said.

Other areas of low compliance included leaving vegetation around small wetlands, which may not be readily apparent during the dry season, he said.

A rule requiring landowners to use properly sized culverts on roads crossing streams was followed only about half the time, Clements said.

A rule requiring removal of petroleum product containers from landings only achieved 58 percent compliance, prompting Clements to tell the audience to "take your oil jugs home."

While most erosion impacts from non-compliance were small — involving less than a cubic yard of dirt in a stream — those that were larger usually involved "legacy conditions," he said.

Many roads were built before forestry regulations were enacted, so soil piled up a half-century ago may be prone to "blowout" into a waterway, he said.

Forestland owners should also try to prevent sediment from roads from washing into waterways through culverts, Clements said.

This problem was the subject of a 2013 Supreme Court decision that was favorable to the timber industry — as runoff from culverts wasn't found to be industrial pollution — but only after years of litigation.

Oregon's rules for forestry and logging are intended to minimize the effects of disturbances, Clements said. "You can't go get logs without disturbing something."

WAWG joins call for Trump to rejoin TPP

Capital Press File

Washington Association of Wheat Growers executive director Michelle Hennings says the state's producers "could experience a catastrophic loss of sales" if the U.S. doesn't rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Capital Press

The Washington Association of Wheat Growers is joining other state and national wheat groups in asking President Donald Trump to rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership, saying a failure to do so would result in a "catastrophic" loss of sales.

"Agriculture is one of the few sectors that routinely enjoys a trade surplus," said Marci Green, a Fairfield, Wash., farmer and president of WAWG, in a press release. "Having TPP go on without us threatens not only that surplus but the U.S. agricultural industry's stability as a whole. We call upon President Trump to use his abilities to re-enter with Congress TPP and protect U.S. jobs and agriculture."

Farmers are already struggling with low commodity prices and attacks on the farm safety net, Green said.

U.S. Wheat would be at a $65 per metric ton disadvantage compared to wheat from Canada and Australia without being part of the TPP, WAWG executive director Michelle Hennings said. Canada and Australia are part of TPP.

"We could lose a huge part of our market," Hennings stated. "With more than 90 percent of the Pacific Northwest's wheat being exported, much of it to TPP countries, our growers could experience a catastrophic loss of sales, depressing farm gate prices even lower than they are today."

U.S. Wheat Associates estimates that demand in Japan — the second largest market for Washington wheat — would fall by 62.5 million bushels annually, leading to higher wheat stocks and depressing baseline wheat futures prices by 50 cents per bushel.

Corps sues Eastern Washington rancher over decades-long trespassing dispute

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

The federal government has sued an Eastern Washington rancher, claiming his animals and operation have trespassed on 30.1 acres managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

In the lawsuit, filed Jan. 19 in U.S. District Court for Eastern Washington, the government alleges that Central Ferry, Wash., rancher Walter "Sonny" Riley of Riley's River Ranch "persistently and continuously" allowed livestock and other personal property to enter or be on the public lands" that are part of the Little Goose Lock and Dam Project.

The lawsuit claims the Rileys don't have a permit or any other authorization to use or occupy the public lands.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Vanessa Waldref said the office generally does not comment on ongoing litigation.

"Defendants have not built any property boundary barrier between their private property and commercial cattle operations and the Corps-managed lands," the lawsuit states. The suit also claims the Rileys maintained a winter feedlot on the land and constructed a large building and a road.

Riley says the building was there before the Corps arrived, and he hasn't had cattle on his pasture near the Corps land for three winters.

The Corps purchased land from Riley's father in 1965. When the dam was put in, Riley said, the Corps built more than 200 miles of fence. Some lands were fenced and some were not, he said.

"If they'd fenced all of ours then, we wouldn't be having this problem with them," he said. "But now they think we need to build the fence. I told them I wasn't going to be the first one to build a fence where the Corps has always built fence before."

Nephew and ranch co-owner Chad Lindgren said there'd been no question who owned the land until 2011, when the government apparently wanted to change boundary lines. He'd assumed the fence was the boundary, he said. The government had to build the fence around the building at the time, he said.

Riley says he has paperwork from the Corps indicating that the agency moved the fence back to avoid causing his operation any additional complications.

The Corps attempted to arrange a land exchange with the Rileys, but claims they have not submitted any of the required paperwork, failed to identify lands suitable for an exchange and were unwilling to pay the required administrative fees.

"They want us to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars just in paperwork before they'll even think about trading or selling," Lindgren said.

The government is asking for "a preliminary and permanent injunction," prohibiting the Rileys from allowing unauthorized livestock on the land, constructing structures and roads or leaving personal property on it.

Riley said he is willing to trade or buy the land from the Corps at fair-market value.

"They think that land's worth $4,000 an acre; it ain't worth $400," he said.

"Sell us the land and leave us alone," Lindgren said. "If it was that important to them, they would have put their fence on the line 60 years ago. ... In their paperwork, they say how they manage land. If they managed it very well, it would have been taken care of in 1966 instead of 2018."