

Growers request an end to Strawberry Commission

Wash. ag director to wait for audit

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press



Capital Press File

Three major Washington strawberry growers have asked state Agriculture Director Derek Sandison to disband the state's strawberry commission, echoing a request the commission's board made a year ago.

Washington strawberry production has been declining for decades, and so have assessments collected for research and grower interest in serving on the board.

Commission directors said last spring the eight-member board had too many vacancies to function. In response, the state Department of Agriculture this year held a referendum on whether to terminate the commission. The department mailed ballots to 125 growers and got 13 back, not enough to validate the election.

"I guess it kind of illustrates the interest in the whole thing," said the commission's interim chairman, Richard Sakuma of Sakuma Brothers Farms in Skagit County.

State law also allows Sandison to dissolve the commission if growers who produce at least one-fifth of the state's crop request it. This month, the department received such a request from three Lynden operations, Clark's Berry Farm, Curt Maberry Farm and Maberry Packing.

The three met the 20 percent threshold. Sandison, however, will wait for a state audit of the commission's finances before making a decision, a department spokesman said. The department expects the audit, the first on the commission since 2012, to be done soon, though it does not have an exact time frame, the spokesman said.

The department oversees 22 agricultural commodity commissions and has been hoping that strawberry growers will emerge who want to revitalize the commission. According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, more than 600 Washington farms produced strawberries. The commis-

Major Washington strawberry growers are asking the state Department of Agriculture to terminate the Washington Strawberry Commission. Strawberry production statewide has declined over the past several decades.

sion, however, said in a letter last year that there were fewer than 40 active strawberry growers, mostly small producers.

Maberry Packing owner Jon Maberry said Tuesday that continuing the commission may benefit fresh strawberry growers, but most of the state's strawberries are cultivated for processing. Those growers don't need to develop a new variety or promote fresh strawberries, he said. Farms already produce a variety, Hood, favored by processors, he said.

"We're an ingredient," he said. "We're not getting a lot out of (the commission) for the processing side."

Maberry said California has come to dominate the strawberry market. Plus, a labor shortage discourages new plantings of a crop that must be harvested by hand, he said. "We can't get enough people to pick."

The commission is authorized to levy an assessment of one-half cent per pound. It didn't collect assessments in 2017, anticipating its demise. The year before, the commission collected \$36,144.

Sakuma said that he hasn't given up on the idea of the commission reforming itself into an association for fresh strawberry growers. Such a group could promote locally grown berries and fund research into new varieties to appeal to consumers.

A challenge would be raising enough money, he said. The state produced 900,000 pounds of fresh strawberries in 2016, he said.

Dried GMO apple 'bits' debut on Amazon.com

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press



Okanogan Specialty Fruits

Arctic ApBitz, dried apple slices that look like french fries, began selling on Amazon.com on March 26. They are made from non-browning genetically modified apples.

Other manufacturers of fresh and dried sliced apples use chemical additives to prevent browning but it can alter flavor.

Other than the Arctic brand being synonymous with genetically modified, there is no GMO labeling. However, the packaging has a link to the company website that explains the genetic modification.

Carter said ApBitz were developed to avoid wasting apples that were not a suitable size for fresh slicing.

In coming years, the company will offer Arctic Granny Smith, Fuji and Gala. All but the Gala have been approved as safe in the U.S. and Canada. The Gala entered the approval process more recently.

The company will have 660 acres of orchards in Washington state by the end of 2018, growing to 1,450 acres by mid-2019 and in 2020 will plant an 1,000 acres in Washington and on the East Coast, Carter has said.

Zinke grizzly decision draws criticism from NW ranchers

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press



Associated Press File

SEDRO-WOOLLEY, Wash. — In an apparent turn-about, the Trump administration is restarting a study of grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades that was put on hold last December.

"Restoring the grizzly bear to the North Cascades ecosystem is the American conservation ethic come to life," Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke said March 23 at the North Cascades National Park Complex headquarters in Sedro Woolley.

"We are managing the land and the wildlife according to the best science and best practices. The loss of the grizzly bear in the North Cascades would disturb the ecosystem and rob the region of an icon," Zinke said. "We are moving forward with plans to restore the bear to the North Cascades, continuing our commitment to conservation and living up to our responsibility as the premier stewards of our public land."

Zinke, who met with the region's native American tribes the day before, emphasized the cultural and spiritual importance of grizzly bears in tribal communities, the contributions grizzly bears make to the biodiversity of the ecosystem, and the ecological devastation that the permanent loss of grizzly bears would cause if nothing is done.

Zinke's statement delighted environmentalists and left ranchers and some other rural residents disappointed, baffled, angry and feeling betrayed.

In December, Conservation Northwest, a regional

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has restarted a study of reintroducing grizzly bears into the North Cascades of Washington state, causing ranchers and others to worry that the predators will hurt their livelihoods.

conservation organization strongly supportive of grizzly bear recovery, lamented media reports that North Cascades National Park Superintendent Karen Taylor-Goodrich said at a Dec. 13 Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee meeting in Missoula, Mont., that Zinke's office had asked her staff to stop work on its environmental impact statement for grizzly bear recovery.

On Friday, Conservation Northwest and Defenders of Wildlife issued statements thanking Zinke for supporting recovery and restarting the EIS process.

A final EIS will be issued in late summer. The National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will then choose a no-action alternative or one of several proactive alternatives. The proactive alternatives aim to restore a reproducing population of about 200 grizzlies by bringing them in from other areas.

The agencies' decision will be final and will not need

tion, said the idea of "dumping man-eating grizzly bears from helicopters into Washington national parks has not been well thought out."

Once grizzlies walk out of the park into rural towns and private and state lands, people will be greatly impacted, Ryan said.

"Already the livestock community has had little to no help with the management and recovery of wolves in the North Cascades, and cannot accept and welcome another federally listed apex predator with no monetary help from the federal government," she said.

Ethan Lane, executive director of the Public Lands Council and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association Federal Lands organization, said those groups are extremely disappointed. He said Zinke has talked about being a better neighbor, but that reintroducing as many as 200 man-eating predators into an area "reeling from an exploding gray wolf population is anything but neighborly."

The Oregon Cattlemen's Association also issued a statement opposing Zinke's action, citing increased public safety risk in a region already struggling with wolves.

Okanogan County Commissioner Jim DeTro said he was "shocked and baffled."

"I don't know why the hell they are restarting the process. Even downtown Seattle doesn't want them," DeTro said.

No economic study was done, a habitat study is fatally flawed and many rural residents believed the administration had stopped the project, he said.

Defunct Oregon beef processor expects to cover debts

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

EUGENE, Ore. — An Oregon beef processor has shut down while owing \$4.6 million to cattle suppliers, but the company says in court filings that it expects its assets are worth more than its debts.

A court-appointed receiver will oversee the dissolution of Bartels Packing, which in mid-March closed its slaughterhouse and processing facilities near Eugene, Ore.

Apart from the immediate financial impacts to suppliers, the demise of Bartels Packing also signifies the loss of a major cattle buyer in Oregon's livestock industry.

"We look for competition in the marketplace, so there's one less competitor in the marketplace now," said Bruce Anderson, owner of the Eugene Livestock Auction.

Representatives of Bartels Packing would regularly attend Oregon several livestock auctions, where they'd primarily bid on culled dairy cattle and other "butcher cows" that would be processed into hamburger,

Chris and Kandi Bartels, who own defunct beef processor Bartels Packing near Eugene, Ore., have closed the business but expect to have enough assets to repay debts, including \$4.6 million owed to cattle suppliers.

Anderson said.

Bartels Packing was among the three largest bidders for cattle at the Woodburn Livestock Exchange, said Tom Elder, the auction yard's owner. The other two companies, Walt's Wholesale Meats and Schen Packing, operate out of Washington state.

Specifically, Bartels Packing had a demand for organic dairy cows, which provide much-needed supplementary income for dairy farmers, he said.

"There's already plenty of cows to keep these packers busy," Elder said.

Less competition for cattle typically means lower prices.

When Bartels occasionally didn't attend the auction, prices were about 10 percent lower for cattle the company would normally bid on, he said.

However, broader fluctuations in the beef market may compensate for the closure of Bartels Packing, and another competitor may eventually fill its niche, Elder said.

"There's definitely an opportunity there for someone," he said.

Oregon already has limited beef processing facilities,

so the absence of Bartels Packing will be felt in the industry, said Jerome Rosa, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association.

"It's definitely going to have an impact on beef prices here in the Northwest," Rosa said. "This is a real sad situation to lose a packer of that size in Oregon."

With the demand for U.S. beef in China, though, another business could potentially buy Bartels' equipment and replace the lost slaughter and processing facilities, either at the same location or a different one, Rosa said.

The company's owner, Chris Bartels, did not respond to a request for comment.

In court documents seeking to dissolve the company, Bartels requested that a receiver oversee the liquidation of assets to maximize their value.

The company's assets are worth between \$13.5 million and \$14 million, including \$8 million in inventory, \$300,000 in accounts receivable and more than \$5.5 million in fixed assets, such as equipment, according to court filings.

Weekly fieldwork report

Item/description	Ore.	Wash.	Idaho	Calif.
• Snow water equivalent*	69.7%	111.8%	97.1%	76.2%
• Percent area in drought	76.1%	11.7%	44.3%	88.9%
• Avg. temperature, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	33-50% above	33% below/ 33% above	33% below/ 50% above	50-60% above
• Precipitation, 6-10 day outlook (Percent chance deviation from normal)	40% above/ Normal	40% above	40% above/ Normal	Normal/ 40% below
• Soil moisture anomaly (Monthly deviation from normal)	Normal/ Below normal	Above normal/ Normal	Above normal/ Normal	Below normal

*Aggregate average percent of median as of March 20. Medians calculated for the period from 1981-2010. Sources: USDA, NRCS; NOAA, www.ca.gov; www.drought.gov/

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