

Washington asparagus farmers gearing up for spring harvest

Growers hope for good return on market price

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Cold weather is stalling Washington's asparagus harvest.

"We've got all these little purple heads sticking up, they're all wanting to grow, but we're just not getting the heat units to get them up and get them going," said Gary Larsen, chairman of the Washington Asparagus Commission and a Pasco-area farmer.

Larsen and another farmer are ready to start cutting, he said, but with higher minimum wages, growers are hesitant to send workers into the fields when there's not much crop to cut.

The crop fared well over a mild winter, he said.

"It actually would have been nicer to have a little bit of cold weather and maybe get rid of some of those bugs," he said. "Asparagus makes it through the winter pretty well."

Insects should not be an issue this early, he said. Asparagus beetles could arrive



Washington's asparagus harvest is almost ready to start, says Gary Larsen, a Pasco, Wash., farmer and chairman of the Washington Asparagus Commission.

with warmer weather, then blow out with the first wind, he said.

Right now, asparagus sold in grocery stores and restaurants is likely from Mexico or Peru, Larsen said. Mexico is just completing its harvest.

"In say, two weeks, if you're not seeing Washington asparagus in the stores, you're getting old-crop Mex-

ican grass, so be careful," he said.

Washington grows 4,000 to 4,500 acres of asparagus, and acreage is increasing, Larsen said. He estimated 300 acres will convert to organic in the state in three years.

Roughly 45 to 60 farmers raise asparagus.

Larsen has grown aspara-

gus since 1985. He raises it as his primary crop on 325 acres.

Larsen said he enjoys working with the people who cut the crop during harvest season.

"They're fun to have around — when the season's over, it's just too much quiet," he said.

Larsen aims to reach a

yield of 15,000 pounds of asparagus per acre. The state's average yield is 6,000 to 7,000 pounds, but he usually gets 9,000 to 10,000 pounds per acre. "I think that 15,000 pounds is within grasp," he said.

Prices remain a question mark, Larsen said. Overproduction in Mexico put prices at 99 cents to \$1.49 per pound.

"Hopefully we don't see that because at 99 cents in the stores, we're more than likely losing money," he said.

For farmers to break even, they need to receive about 80 cents per pound, he said. How much they receive depends on whether they pack the asparagus themselves or sell it to a shipper-packer.

Typically, 55 percent of what a farmer receives goes to pay the cutters, he said, and other expenses come out of the remaining 45 percent.

In his case, if he sells his crop for 80 cents a pound wholesale it will often sell at retail for \$2 or more.

"It's getting pretty rough out there," he said. "Every time we increase the minimum wage or paid leave, although it's good for the people, it's not good for the owner."

Bear Branch Farms to host open farm day

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

Bear Branch Farms, a small family-run farm near Stayton, Ore., will host its third annual "open farm" day Saturday, April 21, from noon to 3 p.m. The public is invited for tours and to spend the afternoon.

"It just gets people onto the farm, so kids and families can get connected to where their food comes from," said Janis Newsom, who owns the farm with her husband, Nate. "They can go walk the fields, walk around the greenhouses, pet and feed the animals, ask gardening questions, the whole gamut."

Bear Branch Farms grows more than 100 different fruits and vegetables, which it sells on a Community Supported Agriculture model, or CSA, in which customers pay up front for "shares" of the harvest.

Newsom said they will be raffling a half-price CSA membership during the event. Foodology, a mobile kitchen from Stayton, will also be on site. Newsom said families can bring chairs if they would like to picnic at the farm.

Bear Branch Farms is at 40929 Huntley Road SE. For more information, call the farm at 503-769-3025.

Stemilt to pay \$95,000 in sexual harassment settlement

By **DAN WHEAT**
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Stemilt Growers LLC and its wholly-owned subsidiary Stemilt Ag Services have agreed to pay a tractor driver \$95,000 and implement preventive measures to settle a sexual harassment and retaliation lawsuit from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Stemilt, based in Wenatchee, is one of the state's largest tree fruit companies. Last June, after the lawsuit was filed, a Stemilt spokesman said the company has never tolerated discrimination. He declined further comment.

According to EEOC's lawsuit, Heidi Corona worked for Stemilt as a tractor driver for more than three years in Quincy before being transferred to a company orchard in Wenatchee, where she was the only woman tractor driver.

In her second day in the new location, her direct supervisor drove her to a remote location and made sexually explicit comments, propositioned her for sex and attempted to kiss her, the EEOC said.

Trapped in a moving vehicle and at an unfamiliar and remote location with no cell phone service, Corona, who was in her mid-30s, asked the supervisor to stop and told him she



Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

Stemilt Growers and its orchard management subsidiary, Stemilt Agriculture Services, in Wenatchee, Wash., have settled a lawsuit with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for \$95,000 over the sexual harassment of a tractor driver and retaliation against her.

was only there to work, the EEOC said.

After the incident, the supervisor assigned Corona to pick up trash and excluded her from meetings with other tractor drivers. When she reported the harassment to upper management she was given a choice of

continuing to work under the same supervisor or become a warehouse fruit sorter for lower pay, EEOC said. She took the lower-paying job.

The alleged conduct violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 under which employers are required to prevent and remedy sexual

harassment and are prohibited from retaliation.

EEOC said it filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court after trying to reach a settlement.

Under a consent decree, signed April 3 by U.S. District Judge Thomas O. Rice, Stemilt will pay Corona \$95,000, some of it for lost wages and some for emotional distress, said Carmen Flores, EEOC senior trial attorney.

Corona no longer works for Stemilt, and while EEOC asked that a letter of reprimand be put in the supervisor's folder, EEOC doesn't know if that happened, Flores said.

"We were disappointed he was still a supervisor during the case," she said.

A Stemilt spokesman declined any comment, including whether the supervisor was disciplined.

The decree requires Stemilt to provide an anti-discrimination policy and annual training to all management and staff.

The company agreed to institute complaint-handling procedures and to hold management and supervisors accountable for how they respond to complaints. In addition, Stemilt will post a notice on the case, and report annually to the EEOC for three years.

Flores said Stemilt already had sexual harassment training and re-

porting procedures but that the decree is a fresh emphasis.

"We felt the investigation was not thorough by the company and that's very important if you really want to address problems," Flores said. "It's good for the employer to be vigilant. We find companies have written policies but it seems like they are not taken seriously."

Corona said she hopes, as a result of the settlement, that "Stemilt will listen to a woman who reports harassment and will give her support, not punishment."

"My message for other women workers is don't be afraid, use your voice, don't stay silent," she said.

Nancy Sienko, director of EEOC's Seattle office, said national attention has recently been focused on sexual harassment and that employers must show leadership and foster work atmospheres of respect.

"Corona just wanted to drive tractor, a rare position for a woman in that industry. Instead, she was forced to give up a job she loved and take a pay cut to avoid harassment, an all-too familiar pattern for workers across industries seen from #MeToo accounts," Flores said.

"We hope this settlement sends a clear message that EEOC can be a key resource in the fight to end workplace sexual harassment."



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