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Adapting to change a constant for grower

By **SUZANNE FRARY**
For the Capital Press

WOODLAND, Wash. — George Thoeny is weighing the costs and benefits of crops on his Woodland, Wash., farm and may uproot his berry plants this year. Falling prices and rising labor costs have for several years cut into his berry profits.

Thoeny Farms already has converted most of its 390 acres from berries and vegetables to grass seed. Its raspberry production peaked at 150 acres and is now at 10 acres.

"Raspberries used to go for \$1.70 per pound, but now it's about 50 cents per pound," Thoeny said. "Unless a grower can process berries, or add value with fresh sales, it's hard to make a profit."

Thoeny sells berries at farmers' markets in Southwest Washington and some are shipped to farmers' markets in Seattle. He also has a few acres of strawberries, blackberries and sweet corn.

Thoeny runs the business with his brother, Ted, and mother, Peggy, in the Woodland Bottoms, which once supported a thriving agricultural community. Decades ago, farmers raised a variety of vegetables and the area was home to dozens of dairies, Thoeny said.

About five farms remain,



Suzanne Frary/For the Capital Press

George Thoeny, a third-generation farmer in Woodland, Wash., is considering converting his berry fields to grass seed. Falling wholesale prices and the rising cost of labor have made growing berries less profitable, he says.

he said, the majority of which now grow grass seed. It's a crop that has far lower labor costs.

Thoeny Farms has succeeded for nearly seven decades by adapting to changing conditions, and Thoeny, a third-generation farmer, expects to continue in that tradition. The family grew vegetables, mostly carrots, for about 35 years before planting raspberries, followed by strawberries and blackberries.

The supply of migrant labor dropped off three or four years ago and local farm labor is nonexistent, he said. To harvest their berries and sweet corn, the farm needs about 16 workers, Thoeny said. Hiring

people and complying with government regulations is an "immense amount of work."

Thoeny and his brother can do the work of growing grass seed. Working with family is a perk of his job, Thoeny said, and is what he always wanted to do. He includes other farmers in the area as part of his "extended family." His children have chosen careers off the farm.

"I got into farming when it was easiest, in the '70s, '80s and '90s," Thoeny said. He and his brother may be the last generation of his family to farm, but they don't want to sell their land and hope to leave a healthy business to their kids and grandkids.

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