

# Christmas tree growers narrowly approve checkoff

## Another referendum planned next year

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**  
Capital Press

Christmas tree farmers have narrowly approved a national checkoff program that raises about \$1.8 million a year to promote and research the crop.

Though 51 percent of growers voted in favor of continuing the Christmas Tree Promotion Board during a recent referendum, the program continues to face uncertainty.

Another referendum would normally be required in seven years, but the USDA — which oversees the research and promotion checkoff — has announced that growers will

again vote on its continuation in about one year.

The agency hasn't specified why another vote will occur so soon, but a referendum may be held at the request of the secretary of the USDA, the Christmas Tree Promotion Board or by more than 10 percent of eligible farmers.

Roughly 1,500 Christmas tree growers across the U.S. who sell more than 500 trees a year and pay 15 cents per tree to fund the program are eligible to vote in the referendum.

"I'm pleased we're going to be able to go forward," said Betty Malone, a farmer near Philomath, Ore., who spearheaded the effort to start a checkoff for Christmas trees.

Even so, Malone said she's surprised by the narrow margin of victory, since an inter-



Capital Press File

Harvest time at Greg Hunter Christmas Tree Farm near Tenino, Wash. Though 51 percent of growers voted in favor of continuing the Christmas Tree Promotion Board during a recent referendum, the program continues to face uncertainty.

nal "head count" of growers had indicated stronger support.

Holding another referendum in a year will create uncertainty at a time when the

checkoff program needs to be making long-term decisions about research and promotions, she said.

"It's absolutely crucial for our industry to do that kind of planning," Malone said.

Frans Kok, a Virginia farmer who organized opposition to the checkoff, said he was disappointed by the result because he'd been cautiously optimistic growers had voted against continuing the program.

It's likely USDA decided to hold another referendum next year because the vote was so close, he said.

"It gives us a chance," Kok said. "A swing of 15 votes shouldn't be so hard but we will get significant opposition working against us as well."

Kok said he must discuss

the situation with other growers who funded "Farmers Against Christmas Tree Taxation" to see if they're willing to orchestrate a similar campaign in the future.

Many growers oppose the checkoff both because they feel it's ineffective — consumers aren't likely to grow more aware of Christmas trees — and because they feel the program was foisted upon them, he said.

The checkoff program was first allowed to operate for three seasons before a referendum was held, partly so organizers could compile a list of eligible farmers. Opponents, however, discount that rationale.

"Given the vote, you can see it's extremely controversial," Kok said.

# Cherries doing better than last July

By **DAN WHEAT**  
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Despite sales to China dropping dramatically due to a 50 percent tariff, Washington wholesale cherry prices are "slightly above last year (in July) in most export markets and domestically," says a top export manager.

"The wholesale price to China is much higher driven by great fruit and taxation of the increased tariffs," said Bryan Peebles, export marketing manager of Chelan Fresh Marketing, in Chelan, one of the largest cherry marketers in the state.

Tariffs rising to 50 percent on July 6, in retaliation for the Trump administration tariffs on Chinese goods, have slowed shipment to China "significantly in July compared to last year," Peebles said.

B.J. Thurlby, president of Northwest Cherry Growers, in Yakima, previously reported 341,499, 20-pound boxes of Northwest cherries sold to China as of June 26 compared to 249,432 at the same point a year ago. More recently, shipments to China are "down significantly," he said, adding he did not have specific numbers compiled.

The Pacific Northwest shipped 3.2 million, 20-pound boxes of cherries to China in 2017, valued at approximately



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Jose Lopez picks Orondo Ruby cherries at Griggs Orchard near Orondo, Wash., on June 19. Prices and movement were strong in June and doing better this July than last.

\$127 million. It was 13 percent of the crop.

Fewer cherries going to China puts some downward pressure on prices but it's being offset by great quality, increased repeat sales and a smaller crop, Peebles said.

"This July's prices are improved over last July's. On a 20-pound box, it's in the \$30 to \$35 range, domestic and export," he said.

A cherry glut last July caused prices to tumble.

As of July 23, the industry had shipped more than 20 million boxes of cherries domestically and overseas, said Tom Riggan, Chelan Fresh Marketing general manager.

Thurlby said he thinks the crop will finish at over 24 million boxes, somewhere higher than the last estimate of 23.2 million. Last year's crop was a record 26.4 million boxes.

As of July 17, the industry marked 30 days of shipping more than 500,000 boxes per day. Now it's at 400,000 per day and will be closer to 300,000 by the end of the week, he said.

Other than China, export demand has been outstanding with plenty of large, 9-row cherries heading to more than 40 markets worldwide, Thurlby said. Exports have made up 35 percent of shipments, he said.

"The U.S. grocery retail industry is perhaps one of the most competitive in the world. Produce is key in summer. So when a group of just over 2,000 growers in one corner of the country can say their fruit is on ad in more stores than any other for the third week in a row, then that's really saying something," Thurlby said.

Growers have enjoyed good weather with virtually no crop-ruining rains nor excessive heat.

"Quality remains outstanding. Lots of size and sugar," he said.

Harvest will go to mid-August or maybe later in higher elevations, Thurlby said.



Jayson Korthius/Whatcom Family Farmers

Red raspberries are harvested in Whatcom County, Wash. The Washington Red Raspberry Commission reports that imported red raspberries are undermining U.S. growers.

## Red raspberry imports weigh on U.S. harvest

### No case for trade complaint

By **DON JENKINS**  
Capital Press

A spring surge in imported red raspberries has soured the economics of the summer harvest, according to Washington growers.

Woodland farmer George Thoeny said he sells fresh raspberries at a profit at farmers' markets and a roadside stand, but that he may lose money on fruit he sells for processing.

"The price has been a disaster, an all-time low," he said. "The imports have just killed this industry."

Farmers in the three red raspberry-growing states — Washington, California and Oregon — compete against an increasing volume of foreign fruit. The main competitor, Mexico, more than doubled exports to the U.S. between 2014 and 2017, according to the USDA Economic Research Service.

So far this year, imports from Serbia and Chile have also significantly increased. In April and May alone, 15.5 million pounds of frozen red raspberries came into the U.S. compared to 7.9 million pounds the year before.

The size and timing of the influx left Washington growers in some cases without buyers, particularly for berries that were to be sold for juice, Washington Red Raspberry Commission Executive Director Henry Bierlink said.

"That kind of sent the message to everybody, they can get product without paying much for it," he said.

The raspberry commission suspects growers are being undercut by foreign fruit being dumped on the U.S. market at below the cost of production. Gathering evidence

has been complicated by the way imports are labeled and reported, Bierlink said. The commission retained a Washington, D.C., law firm last year to investigate whether it had a case.

"We asked, and they said, 'You don't have much of one. You need better data,'" Bierlink said.

The state commission led successful challenges to Canadian trade practices in the mid-1980s and Chilean trade practices in the early 2000s. Even with better data, pursuing a new claim would be harder now, Bierlink said.

California has become a major red raspberry state, and many producers there also grow berries in Mexico. "They would have limited interest in suing themselves," Bierlink said.

Another hurdle would be money. Bierlink estimates pursuing a claim would cost \$1 million to \$2 million. Congress in 2005 repealed the Byrd Amendment, which awarded payments to U.S. companies that filed successful trade complaints. The World Trade Organization had ruled the practice illegal.

Unlike many sectors of the farm economy, trade does not benefit red raspberry growers, said Lynden farmer Jon Maberry, the raspberry commission chairman.

"We understand we don't have the same position as some of the other ag commodities," he said. "We would be happy if we could supply the U.S."

Low-cost Mexican red raspberries that end up as an ingredient in juice or other products pose the biggest long-term threat to the U.S. industry, he said.

The raspberry commission is talking to policymakers about labeling laws to inform consumers that they are buying U.S. berries, Maberry said.

"We don't want a bail out, we just want things to be fair," he said. "We think it's in the best interest of consumers to have the U.S. growing its own food."

## Researchers continue to combat growing ventenata threat

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

Ventenata is a strange grass, Tim Prather says.

The University of Idaho plant science professor said he has been "frustrated" by the weed for years.

"It's shallowly rooted, you only find it in the top 3 inches of soil, it's mostly stem, there's not very many leaves, it's not

very tall," he said. "In terms of being in a grass crop, it's going to be shorter than the crop. And yet, we're finding that it's able to take over in long-lived grasses. ... We know there's no way this small plant would out compete a larger perennial grass."

However, it's possible ventenata is a carrier for one or more fungi that cause diseases in other grasses, he said.

Prather said the number of acres ventenata is infesting continues to grow. It occurs throughout northern Idaho and Eastern Washington, and beyond.

It's a problem in pasture, rangeland and grass hays, particularly timothy hay. It can cut the life and production of a timothy hay stand in half, and hay with ventenata cannot be exported.

"You're left with a

low-quality, domestic hay which might be \$50 to \$60 per ton, and you're only getting half the production you should, instead of double the production \$250 to \$260 per ton," Prather said.

Ventenata costs \$22 million each year in forage damage, he estimated.

Cattle don't like to eat hay with ventenata, but will eat pelletized hay that contains ventenata, he said.

UI has looked for herbicides effective in removing a grass from a grass, Prather said.

"There are more limited options," Prather said. "We want to keep the crop as competitive and healthy as possible, so it's not susceptible to injury by the herbicide."

UI is looking at other management options, including proper fertilization and soil

nutrients, raising the cutter-bar height for timothy hay to 4 inches to help stem development and not grazing in the fall.

Ventenata is not yet listed as a noxious weed. Commodity groups may petition the Idaho Department of Agriculture to get it listed, Prather said.

Tools are available for pasture and rangeland. Prather believes progress is being made, but the weed continues to spread.

He recommends farmers keep an eye on county roads and corridors, places where ventenata likes to move in, for early detection and prevention.

"It has not reached everywhere it could in Idaho," he said. "It would be nice to stop it from continuing to expand and try to limit its distribution."

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