



National Onion Association
AMS Nov. 6 reported onion demand as moderate and prices at mostly \$6.50 to \$7. Shipment volume to date was down 17%.

Onion shipments, prices lackluster in SE Oregon, SW Idaho

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Onion shipments from southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho are down double-digit percentages from a year ago, and prices for more than a month have hovered just above many producers’ breakeven points.

The area produces about one-third of the country’s fall-winter storage crop, to which about a dozen states contribute.

“With the cold snap we’ve had and other weather conditions, we have been waiting for the market to react and it just hasn’t,” Mick Davie with USDA Agricultural Marketing Service in Idaho Falls, said Nov. 7.

Some customers “could be waiting to make Thanksgiving buys,” he said. Hopefully, business will pick up next week (Nov. 11-15).” The holiday falls late this year.

“We would always hope it goes up a bit, but at the moment it’s not trending that way,” said Jason Pearson with Eagle Eye Produce in Nyssa, Ore. “Eventually it will go up, and I think stabilize. Everyone has got a lot of onions, and they are just trying to push them out and get rid of them.”

He hopes to see jumbo yellows selling for about \$8 per 50-pound sack by year’s end, roughly a dollar and a half above breakeven.

AMS Nov. 6 reported demand as moderate and prices at mostly \$6.50 to \$7. Shipment volume to date was down 17%. Prices were about 50 cents lower in the Columbia and Umatilla basins, in Washington and Oregon, respectively, reflecting lower transportation costs.

“At the price we are at today, it’s pretty darn mediocre,” said Kay Riley, general manager at Snake River Produce in Nyssa. “Nobody’s getting rich. It’s not terrible, either. We’re at a level where we are covering expenses and making a little bit, but we are not cutting a fat hog by any means.”

He expects the market

to stay mostly unchanged through the rest of the year — except for a possible pickup in the two weeks before Thanksgiving — and then improve as 2020 starts. During the holidays, foodservice business often concentrate on apples and other products at the same time dining and meal-prep activity depletes onion inventory.

The Northwest this time of year accounts for about 80% of volume, but other markets are still active and contributing to supply, said Grant Kitamura, partner in Baker & Murakami Produce in Ontario, Ore.

“It has been slow, so maybe people feel like they haven’t moved enough,” he said. “Movement has been off this far and maybe people feel pressure to sell at these lower prices.”

Weather delayed harvest and caused other problems with this year’s onion crop in southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho.

“We don’t know if it had an effect on price,” Kitamura said. “If there was reduced volume or inventory, nobody is acting like it.”

Paul Skeen of the Malheur County Onion Growers Association said the number of unharvested onions is not yet known but could be between 700 and 1,200 acres out of the approximately 22,000 in southeastern Oregon and southwestern Idaho.

“That’s not a high percentage initially, but everybody had a few.”

Breakeven varies based on growers’ land and other costs, “but there’s not much left over at these prices for growers,” he said Nov. 7.

Movement, possibly dragged by greater international competition, appears to be picking up ahead of Thanksgiving.

“I am anticipating the market to go up and at least get a little stronger,” Skeen said.

Price-wise, “you are only as strong as your weakest link, and we have got to figure out more closely what our cost of production is,” he said.

Record-cold October in Idaho; close in Washington, Oregon

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

Idaho shivered through its coldest October on record, while Washington weathered its second-coldest October and the coolest in more than a century, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Oregon was chilly, too. The month was the fourth-coldest October for the state, according to records that date back to 1895.

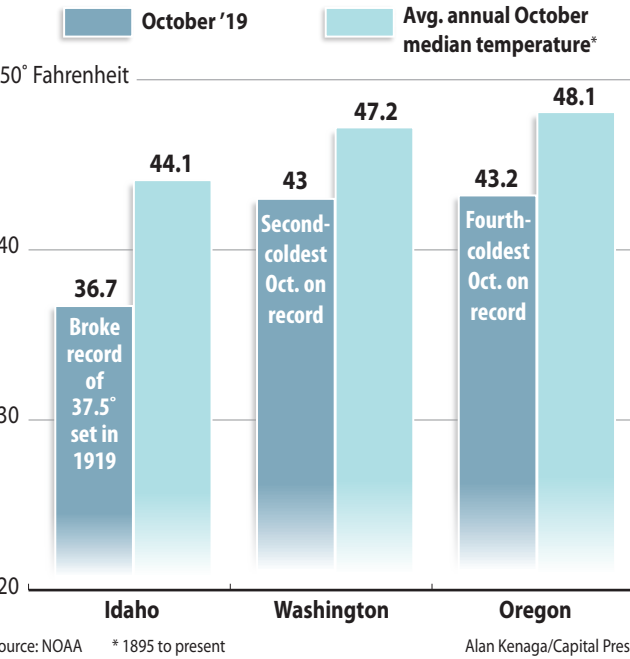
The extended region-wide cold snap defied the odds. NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center forecast in September that the outlook favored a warmer than normal October.

Unusual atmospheric conditions caused frigid air to blow down from the Gulf of Alaska, Washington State Assistant Climatologist Karin Bumbaco said. Normally, warmer and wetter air from the south flows into the region, she said.

“It was really different than we would typically see this time of year,” Bumbaco said.

The cold damaged some

Northwest October temperatures



crops, and the northern winds “made farm work outdoors miserable,” according to the USDA’s late October crop report for Idaho.

The cold October followed a wet and cool September.

The combination was not good, said Snohomish County, Wash., organic farmer Tristan Kelsick.

“We didn’t get the growth we normally get in Septem-

ber,” he said. “It set up an unsuccessful October.”

Klickitat County, Wash., rancher Neil Kayser said the September rain was good for pastures.

“Then October came and froze everything back, and now we’re short on pasture,” he said.

Washington and Oregon’s coasts were cooler than normal, and temperatures got even colder than

usual inland.

Idaho’s average temperature for the month was 36.7 degrees. That was 7.4 degrees before average. It broke the record of 37.5 degrees set in 1919.

Idaho’s minimum average temperature of 24.7 degrees also set a record, breaking the old mark by 7.1 degrees.

In Washington, the average temperature of 43 degrees was the second-lowest on record. The average temperature was 4.2 degrees below normal and the coolest since 1905.

In Oregon, the average temperature was 43.2 degrees, the coolest since 1946 and 4.9 degrees below normal.

Northern California — on the coast and inland — was cooler than average, but average temperatures were not close to setting records. The north coast had its 34th coolest October, while the Sacramento drainage region had its 31st coolest.

The odds favor warmer than average temperatures in November, December and January throughout the West, according to NOAA’s Climate Prediction Center.

Consumers view food as extension of identity

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

TWIN FALLS, Idaho — Food in the 21st century is no longer just about flavor and nutrition, it’s about values and what consumers and food companies stand for, according to an innovator in the industry.

“This is the end of one-size-fits-all food,” Mike Lee, cofounder and co-CEO of Alpha Food Labs, told producers at Northwest Farm Credit Services’ Ag Outlook Conference on Nov. 5.

The Green Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s promised to feed the world and focused on productivity and improved yields. It prioritized a handful of crops and created a series of monocultures. It traded off agricultural diversity for brand diversity, with 75% of food coming from just 12 crops and five animal species, he said.

It also created a monoculture of ideas as to one way to do things — the most efficient way, he said.

“And I think that’s changing,” he said.

For example, teens today are spending more money on food than clothing. Food has become part of their identity, a statement. It reflects their values. And it’s not just teens. Millennials and others are also seeing food as an extension of their identity, he said.

People can go online now



Mike Lee

and connect to others like them. They become networked and form influential “food tribes” that raise their hand to food companies. Smaller brands are latching onto those values, and the industry is seeing more brands focused on smaller niches, he said.

It’s no longer a mass market. It’s focused on smaller tribes and to “try to be everything to someone rather than something to everyone,” he said.

Consumers want to know how their food was made, where it was grown, whether it’s seasonal or local, he said.

“The process has become the product,” he said.

The GMO debate is evidence of that, he said.

“It sets the stage for farmers to tell the story ... it’s not Tony the Tiger marketing something that’s kind-of-wheat,” he said.

The 21st century eater is focused on health, the experience and sustainability — and healthy comes first, he said.

“People are looking at food as medicine,” he said.

They prefer convenience, but they’re not willing to sacrifice healthy for convenience — and they’re willing to pay a premium for that. They’re looking to functional ingre-

dients beyond nutrition, and that’s a \$247 billion market today, he said.

Sustainability is another big issue with consumers, but it has become a really big, vague, daunting thing, he said.

“You’d be hard-pressed to find a man on the street who doesn’t want to help the planet,” he said.

But it’s a hedonistic sustainability; they want to do what’s right for themselves and their family, he said.

“For most people, they’re just trying to find what they can afford that’s tasty,” he said.

Consumers are also looking for the experience, and their choice of fresh food is on the rise. The perimeter of the grocery store is outgrowing the interior, and fresh

food has infiltrated all retail channels — with consumers able to get a fresh salad at a convenience store, he said.

Frozen foods are also coming back, and brands are picking up on it and rebranding frozen as closer to fresh, he said.

The future of food is “everything” because there are an infinite number of identities, values and points of view, he said.

For more on Lee’s future of food, visit <https://vimeo.com/362821283>

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