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The FFRobotics robotic apple picker mounted on an Automated Ag Bandit Xpress picking platform.

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

PROGRESS REPORT

Companies race to improve performance of their robotic picking machines



An Abundant Robotics apple picker at a T&G Global orchard in New Zealand in February.

Abundant Robotics

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

The first season of limited commercial robotic picking of U.S. apples fell short of its goal, but a key figure in the effort believes it will soon reach the mark.

“The results of have been encouraging and challenging. Up and down. The encouraging part is when systems have worked the way they are designed, they are doing the job. We’re getting the results we want,” Dan Steere, CEO of Abundant Robotics of Hayward, Calif., said of his machine’s work in Central Washington’s apple harvest this fall.



Dan Steere

“However, we’ve been limited by too many mechanical hardware failures. We had to invent

a lot of custom automation from the start. We’ve seen too many things break too often to say we’re ready to manufacture a lot of machines,” Steere said. “We’re focusing on reinforcing the durability of what we’ve built and I don’t think we are too far away from reaching that durability.”

Robotic harvest has been a dream of the U.S. apple industry for years, particularly in Washington, where 65% of the nation’s fresh apple crop is grown. Apples are the state’s top agricultural commodity with an annual farmgate value of \$2.5 billion.

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Christmas tree growers grapple with tight supplies

Oregon industry recovering from past oversupply

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

SALEM — A large semi-trailer backed into the outdoor shipping yard Monday afternoon at BTN of Oregon, where workers loaded tightly wrapped Christmas trees for delivery to stores and tree lots from California to Texas and across the border into Mexico.

BTN of Oregon grows approximately 2,500 acres of Christmas trees east of Salem, including popular Noble and Douglas firs. Business is moving practically nonstop as the calendar flips to December.

“A lot of praying goes on this time of year,” said Ben Stone, president of the family-owned company. “A lot of sleepless nights.”

Tight supplies are again challenging Christmas tree vendors as the industry continues to recover from a massive glut of cheap trees in the mid-2000s that caused wholesale prices to crash, forcing hundreds of Northwest farms to go out of business or switch to less labor-intensive crops.

Stone, who runs BTN of Oregon with his brothers, Tyler and Nathan, said they are receiving calls daily from people they’ve

never talked to before looking for trees.

“We just can’t help,” Stone said. “It’s unfortunate.”

Oregon is the leading producer of Christmas trees nationwide, with 383 licensed growers selling about 4.6 million trees in 2018, according to estimates from Oregon State University.

That is down significantly over the last decade, when there

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George Plaven/Capital Press

Workers load Christmas trees into a truck on Dec. 2 at BTN of Oregon near Salem.



Pacific Northwest Waterways Association
Fairfield, Wash., wheat grower Marci Green and her family are featured in the “Faces of the Snake River” campaign to target misinformation about breaching dams on the river system.

‘Faces of Snake River’ campaign targets dam breaching misinformation

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Northwest agricultural transportation advocates are backing a new advertising campaign to combat environmentalists’ “simplistic messages” about removing four dams on the Snake River.

“Snake River Faces,” sponsored by the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, tells

the story of several people who have personal connections to the river, including a wheat farmer, a family winery and a port director who welcomes commercial tour boats and kayaks on the river in her free time.

Environmental groups have for years called for the removal of the Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite dams,

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