

Experts: Blueberry surge drives need for quality

Global production has roughly doubled

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — As global blueberry production has roughly doubled, farmers have increasingly been competing on quality rather than on timing, according to experts.

About 1 million metric tons of blueberries were harvested in 2018, up from nearly 564,000 in 2014, according to the International Blueberry Organization.

Just a few years ago, the worldwide blueberry industry had “supply gaps” during which the crop was almost totally unavailable to consumers, said Amelie Aust, co-CEO of the Fall Creek Farm & Nursery in Lowell, Ore.

“That’s going away. We’re going toward a phase of 52-week blueberry consumption that we can build on as an industry,” Aust said Feb. 3 during the Ore-



Oregon Blueberry Commission

A doubling in global blueberry production has created an emphasis on quality for growers.

gon Blueberry Conference in Salem, Ore.

For the past couple of decades, the blueberry industry has focused on filling supply windows, she said. As production as expanded, grocers now have more options and are becoming more discerning.

“Quality will have a big-

ger impact on our pricing and also what kind of home our fruit can get,” Aust said.

Retailers generally have a diminishing tolerance for blueberries that are of lower quality, said David Brazzelton, Fall Creek’s founder and Aust’s father. As a major blueberry nursery, the company keeps close

tabs on global production trends.

“It’s just not OK anymore and it’s being punished,” he said.

The greater availability of blueberries is also prompting the market to “segregate,” not only according to container sizes but also different price

points for various qualities of fruit, Aust said. The trend is especially becoming apparent in the United Kingdom and Europe.

“This is a big market development opportunity we’re trying to learn more about,” she said.

According to the International Blueberry Organization, North America’s share of global highbush blueberry production fell from about 50% to 30% between 2016 and 2018 due to growing competition from other regions.

For example, South American production has grown from about 162,000 metric tons to 264,000 metric tons in that time.

“Peru this year has surpassed Chile as the largest blueberry exporting country in the world,” Brazzelton said.

Western European blueberry production jumped from about 22,000 metric tons to more than 30,000 metric tons between 2016 and 2018, while Eastern European production surged from about 20,000 metric

tons to 50,000 metric tons, according to IBO.

“Individuals are eating more, and more individuals are eating blueberries,” Brazzelton said.

In 2019, North America produced a record 870 million pounds of the crop, up 27% from the previous year, with a slight majority of the production going toward the fresh market rather than for processing, he said.

The Northwest grew about 72% of the blueberries produced during the 2019 summertime fresh market season, up from about 63% in 2016, he said.

“We’re the farthest away (from major metropolitan markets) but we’re actually dominating that window in fresh.”

Oregon and Washington benefit from warm days and cool nights, which increase quality potential. The region also hasn’t experienced as much weather-related production volatility as other areas, Brazzelton said.

“We don’t have that big swing here. It’s amazingly regular,” he said.

Washington takes on beef origin label bill

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The beef industry’s civil war over country-of-origin labels has come to the Washington Legislature, where an unusually long and politically varied list of lawmakers are sponsoring a bill to require the state’s retailers to mark meat as either “USA beef” or “imported.”

The bill’s prime sponsor, Rep. Joel Kretz, R-Wauconda, said the USA label should be reserved for cattle born, raised and slaughtered in the U.S., not imported to a feedlot or packing plant.

“It’s two different products in my opinion,” he said. “It’s just truth to the consumer.”

House Bill 2712 would require grocery stores to post a “conspicuous placard” by the “USA beef” and another by the “imported” beef. A cow born and slaughtered in the U.S. would qualify as USA beef if it didn’t spend more than 60 days outside the country.

Representatives of feedlots and packers say a state labeling law



Capital Press file

The Washington House is considering a bill to require retailers to label beef from cows born, raised and slaughtered in the U.S. as “USA beef.”

would harm relationships with Canadian producers they need.

“In the Northwest, we don’t have enough cattle to fill the feedlot and kill-plant capacity year-round,” Jared Easterday, president of the Washington Cattle Feeders Association, told the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

Mandatory nationwide country-of-origin labels for beef were

ruled unfair by a World Trade Organization arbitration panel in 2015. The panel concluded the labels hurt Canadian and Mexican producers and that they would be entitled to retaliatory tariffs of about \$1 billion a year. Congress subsequently repealed the law.

R-CALF USA, a national ranchers’ group, has been working since then to bring back country-of-origin labeling. R-CALF

says current labeling practices mislead consumers into thinking beef packaged in the U.S. was raised in the U.S.

The Cattle Producers of Washington brought the policy to Kretz. Meanwhile, a conservation group, the Lands Council, enlisted allies.

Democratic and Republican lawmakers, 27 in all, signed on as co-sponsors, representing the full range of the Legislature, from left to right. The state Department of Agriculture doesn’t have a position on the bill, but department policy adviser Evan Sheffield called the list of sponsors “one of the more impressive I’ve seen.”

“That is a strong indicator that folks want to know where the products they buy in the grocery store are from,” he said.

The Washington Fair Trade Coalition, whose members include labor, health, environmental, faith-based and social-justice groups, endorsed the bill. Coalition board member Stan Sorscher told legislators that labels tell him where his shirt came from. “My

food is much more important than that,” he said.

Although it has broad bipartisan support, the bill is handicapped by not having full support from the beef industry. In addition to the cattle feeders association, the Washington Cattlemen’s Association opposes the bill.

Cattlemen’s association Executive Director Danny DeFranco said the state’s beef industry needs good relations with Canadian producers. “Our concern is putting up more walls,” he said.

Agri Beef lobbyist Paul Berendt said the company’s Toppenish plant processes 400,000 head of cattle a year and 30% to 45% spent time in Canada. Washington, Idaho and Oregon don’t have enough cows to sustain the plant, he said.

He warned a state labeling law would be vulnerable to lawsuits.

Kretz said Tuesday he was pressing ahead with the bill.

“The consumers are the ones who should be demanding it,” he said. “My motive is to help the cowboys stay alive.”

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