

Christmas tree growers see solid year as demand rises

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Demand for Christmas trees noticeably increased during the 2020 marketing season, similar to other seasonal products such as fireworks and pumpkins.

“People are spending more time at home,” Bob Schaefer, general manager of Noble Mountain Tree Farm in Salem, Ore., said.

Despite reports of a tree shortage, Schaefer said the industry has actually brought supplies back into balance with demand after a prolonged surplus that depressed prices in the early 2010s.



Bob Schaefer

The perception of scarcity may have been created by some U-Cut farms running out of trees early, but that’s not reflective of an industry-wide problem, he said. “It doesn’t mean there aren’t people down the road with trees available.”

Varying coronavirus-related restrictions on retailers in California — a major Christmas tree market — cost Noble Mountain Tree Farm some customers, but the company was able to compensate with increased sales to other areas, he said.

Extravagantly priced Christmas



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

Christmas trees grow at Drake's Crossing Nursery near Silverton, Ore. Growers report that good demand has resulted in higher prices.

trees sold by overseas retailers haven’t resulted in a windfall for Oregon farmers, who say wholesale prices have risen only modestly.

While “out of sight” prices reportedly charged in some Asian markets may be attributed to “price gouging,” farmers say they’ve avoided such exploitative tactics, regardless of whether Christmas trees are sold to exporters.

“We charge the same price to them as we do to Joe Blow down the street,” Schaefer said.

Stroda Brothers Farm only slightly increased its wholesale prices this year because the company was wary of charging more than the market would bear, said Kirk Stroda, co-owner of the Mon-

roe, Ore., operation.

“If the retailers don’t make any money, that means we don’t make any money,” he said.

The isolation and stress of the coronavirus pandemic likely boosted the appeal of Christmas trees, with an industry-commissioned survey finding that 39% of consumers were more likely to buy a real tree for their family this year.

More than three-quarters of the surveyed consumers also described Christmas trees as “special” and an “experience” rather than a product, according to the Christmas Tree Promotion Board, which raises money for industry research and marketing.

“With the year we just had,



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

Christmas trees are loaded onto a truck by workers at Noble Mountain Tree Farm near Salem, Ore.

everyone is needing some feel-good tradition,” said Kari Puffer, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association.

Another trend that farmers noticed in 2020 was that consumers began buying Christmas trees before the usual start of the marketing season after Thanksgiving. Whether the earlier and stronger demand for their product will outlast the coronavirus pandemic remains to be seen, though.

“It’s hard to say if this year was just an anomaly or the new normal,” said Casey Grogan of Silver Bells Tree Farm near Silverton, Ore.

Though the farm has seen high interest from exporters, reports of high overseas prices aren’t likely to convince growers to invest heavily in this market, Grogan said.

The detection of a pest by foreign regulators can result in the rejection of an entire load of Christmas trees, which is “not all that uncommon” and thus seen as an oversized risk

by farmers, he said.

“If you can sell a tree domestically, you’re going to do that,” he said.

The crop’s increased popularity and tight supplies aren’t likely to spur another round of over-planting because the region’s agriculture industry has changed over the past couple of decades, farmers say.

“People are cognizant and understanding of not putting themselves in that predicament,” said Puffer.

In the early 2000s, landowners with spare 5- to 10-acre fields planted Christmas trees speculatively but then lacked a sales outlet when they reached maturity, said Stroda.

Once the crop was ready to harvest, the growers sold their trees at steep discounts that affected the entire industry, he said. “I think that’s what really killed the market before.”

Farmers who were burned by experience are unlikely to repeat the mistake, while others have also learned from that history, Stroda said. “If you don’t have a market, don’t plant extra trees.”

Christmas trees must also compete for acreage with other crops, such as hemp, hazelnuts, blueberries and wine grapes, which have become more common in Oregon, said Jason Hupp of Drake’s Crossing Nursery near Silverton, Ore.

Rural Oregon airport expansion clears legal hurdle

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Farmland conservation advocates have failed to convince an Oregon land use board to block a controversial rural airport expansion plan but vow to continue fighting the project.

The state’s Land Use Board of Appeals has dismissed objections against a planned runway extension and other improvements to the Aurora State Airport, which 1,000 Friends of Oregon and other critics claim will urbanize an agricultural area.

Opponents of the project

may still decide to challenge LUBA’s decision before the Oregon Court of Appeals or move forward with a parallel lawsuit against the expansion project in Marion County Circuit Court.

According to LUBA, the Oregon Department of Aviation wasn’t required to independently analyze the airport project’s compliance with statewide land use planning goals as long as the expansion followed Marion County’s comprehensive plan.

“Requiring a separate determination of compliance with both the comprehensive plan and the goals would create an uncoordinated regula-

tory scheme that could apply different standards to identical issues,” LUBA said.

The airport’s expansion is not incompatible with Marion County’s agricultural lands policies because it’s not clear that the project plan calls for improvements that would extend outside the “public” zone and into the “exclusive farm use” zone, the ruling said.

About 55 acres proposed for acquisition by the airport would remain farmland even though they’d be included in a runway protection zone, and it’s “just speculation” that other components would be located on farmland,

LUBA said.

LUBA also rejected the argument that the airport expansion will significantly affect land use because the project plan “does not approve or authorize any development” and does “not change the status quo,” the ruling said.

Andrew Mulkey, attorney for 1,000 Friends of Oregon, said the airport’s preferred alternative for expansion clearly shows that new construction would occur beyond a road that separates the public zone from the farm zone.

“I think that LUBA’s interpretation is not sup-

ported by the documents in the record,” he said.

If the project’s opponents decide against appealing LUBA’s decision — or it’s upheld on appeal — they’d then proceed with a lawsuit in Marion County that alleges the public process for the airport expansion plan violated the state’s Administrative Procedures Act, Mulkey said.

The Aurora Airport Improvement Association, a group of business that supports the expansion, is pleased that LUBA has made clear the project complies with all state and local land use rules, said Wendie

Kellington, its attorney.

“Too bad it took so much time and money to establish,” Kellington said.

Opponents have relied on a “false narrative” that the runway extension would spill onto farmland, while the runway protection zone would actually ensure the land remained agricultural in perpetuity, she said. “That’s completely consistent with EFU zoning.”

A utility facility that may have been placed on farmland has likely been rendered obsolete by improvements to aviation technology, Kellington said. “That’s not even going to happen.”

Less mess, fuss for Asian giant hornet trappers next year

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Volunteers trapping for Asian giant hornets next year won’t be asked to mail in all the insects they catch, Washington State Department of Agriculture spokeswoman Karla Salp said.

The department has examined thousands of captured specimens and found 1.5% were bees. The department was worried that the traps, baited with

a sweet liquid mixture, would attract and drown a higher percentage of pollinators.

Thousands of collections still must be examined, but the department is satisfied the traps aren’t a threat to the bees that hornet trappers are trying to protect.

“The point of having people mail in everything was to make sure the traps weren’t having unintended consequences,” Salp said. “We’re not killing off a lot of bees with these traps, which was our main concern.”

Hundreds of people responded to the department’s call last summer to make and hang traps baited with orange juice and rice cooking wine. One volunteer caught an Asian giant hornet, and many faithfully submitted what they collected each week, either by mail or in drop boxes.

The collateral catch included moths, fruit flies, paper wasps, yellow jackets and spotted wing drosophila, an invasive pest that damages fruit. The department also reported detecting for the first time in the U.S. a parasitoid wasp, *Leptopilina japonica*,

that preys on spotted wing drosophila. One was found in British Columbia last year, according to the department.

Next year, trappers will be asked to report suspected Asian giant hornets. The rest, though, can be tossed out.

Salp said she expects more people will set traps next year,

knowing they won’t be asked to mail or take to drop boxes insect remains.

“It’s amazing the level of commitment people had,” she said. “But I think it’ll increase the level of participation and decrease the level of dropping out. It’s going to make it simpler.”



Karla Salp/WSDA
An Asian giant hornet trap in a tree.

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Next week we bid farewell and good riddance to 2020.

Usually at this time we are called to reflect on the past 12 months. But who wants to? A global pandemic, economic ruin, wildfires, bitter politics — no, this is a year where you want to keep your eyes forward and sprint right to the end.

But, the proprieties must be observed.

This has been a difficult year for everyone. But as is often the case, there is no shortage of news during difficult times. Capital Press reporters have been on these stories from the beginning.

Since March, we’ve published more than 400 stories about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on agriculture — the government regulations, the changes in the commodity markets and the disruptions in the supply chain.

In the aftermath of this summer’s terrible fires, we published more than 100 stories reporting the causes and effects. We highlighted the stories of everyday people who became heroes for helping their friends and strangers.

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On behalf of everyone here at the Capital Press, I hope you have a very Merry Christmas and wish you the happiest of New Years. Thank you for your patronage.

Joe Beach
Editor & Publisher



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