

Despite frost damage, Washington tree fruit growers predict good crop

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — After a frost that nipped about 10% of their crop, Washington state tree fruit growers say they are eager to clear the remainder of frost season without any more damage.

This spring, especially during a cold snap around April 10, Eastern Washington tree fruit faced frost damage. But growers don't seem concerned — overall, they say, the bloom is big, more than enough to compensate for losses and domestic demand looks favorable.

"This is the first time in about four years we've had a real, true frost season," said B.J. Thurlby, president of the Washington State Fruit Commission and Northwest Cherry Growers. "We're seeing impacts all throughout the growing districts from Tri-Cities up to Canada. It definitely took its toll. But the good news is, we have a huge bloom going."

Thurlby estimated about 10% of this year's cherry crop was lost, but because the overall crop is larger than last year, he said it shouldn't be a concern.

Craig Oswald, field and forecast meteorologist for AgWeatherNet, said that although some growers suffered damage, overall, "We haven't seen any drastic cold air intrusions."



Courtesy of Pat Sullivan

Bees pollinate Chelan cherry blossoms on April 6.

Washington, which leads the nation in apple, pear and cherry production, should wrap up frost season by mid-May.

Bloom this year is about on time with average. Apricots bloom first, followed by cherries, peaches, nectarines, apples and pears. Across much of the southern Yakima Valley, cherries and stone fruits have finished blooming, and in some places, fruitlets are emerging. Orchards farther north lag slightly behind.

Apples in the Wenatchee area are expected to hit full bloom around April 24, close to average. Cherries and stone fruits tend to be most susceptible to frost.

Pat Sullivan, a Tri-Cities area grower, said although his cherry and stone fruit trees faced frost, he's not worried because of the big bloom.

Charles Lyall, a Mattawa grower, said his cherries were barely touched by frost, while his friends elsewhere "got nipped really good."

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California is also expected to have a big cherry crop. Some years, this might worry Washington growers, but because the pandemic increased demand for fresh cherries, growers say the extra volume could help meet demand.

"A big California crop is not necessarily a problem for us," said Sullivan, the Tri-Cities grower.

Meanwhile, apple growers are eyeing New York and Michigan, second and third to Washington in apple production, because the markets are interconnected. In 2012, freezes wiped out about 50% of New York's apple crop and 95% of Michigan's. Washington growers that year made good money.

Cynthia Haskins, president of New York Apple Association, told the Capital Press Monday her state faced a cold snap last week, "but it was quick and brief with no lasting effects at all." Growers, Haskins said, are optimistic they'll have a good crop.

Don Armock, president of Riveridge Produce Marketing, one of Michigan's largest apple producers, said growers haven't had any damaging temperatures yet, but trees are likely to be vulnerable in the next three to four weeks.

Washington Legislature sends OT bill to Inslee

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Legislature on Thursday sent Gov. Jay Inslee a bill that will make Washington the first state to give all farmworkers time-and-a-half overtime pay after 40 hours in a week. The bill will phase in the requirement in 2024.

Washington will nose out California. The Golden State has been phasing in overtime pay since 2019, but not all farmworkers there will be paid time-and-a-half after 40 hours until 2025.

Beginning in 2022, Washington farmworkers must be paid overtime after 55 hours. The threshold drops to 48 hours in 2023 and finally to 40 hours the next year.

The bill also protects farms from back-pay lawsuits filed after the state Supreme Court ruled in November that it was unconstitutional to deny dairy workers overtime. The suits seek to apply the decision retroactively.

The bill doesn't change the court's ruling. Dairy workers are receiving time-and-a-half after 40 hours a week now. But the Washington State Dairy Federation said Thursday it was thankful for protection from lawsuits.

Farm groups had lobbied for a seasonal exemption to overtime, allowing farmers to choose 12 weeks a year to pay time-and-a-half after 50 hours. Labor groups opposed the provision, and Democrats rejected a Republican-sponsored amendment to add it.

Nevertheless, the Washington Farm Bureau said the bill was "tremendous news for all connected to agriculture in Washington," considering the "ag-overtime disaster created by the state Supreme Court."

The Senate voted 42-6 to accept the House's changes to Senate Bill 5172. The House didn't change the overtime provisions, but did strengthen protections against back-pay lawsuits. Six Republicans voted against the bill.

On California farms with more than 25 employees, workers will receive time-and-a-half after 40 hours beginning in 2022.

Workers on smaller farms will receive time-and-a-half after 55 hours. The threshold will drop to 50 hours in 2023 and 40 hours in 2025.

Parma orchard researchers assess damage from recent frosts

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press



Brad Carlson/Capital Press

Tom Elias, orchard manager at the University of Idaho Parma Research & Extension Center, checks almond blossoms April 15.

Frosts in southwest Idaho on April 9 and 11 caused some damage in orchards at the University of Idaho Parma Research & Extension Center.

Orchard Manager Tom Elias said frosts "haven't done a lot of damage, but have done some."

Quality and yield should be mostly good barring further damage before mid-May, when the area's frost risk typically drops substantially, Elias and UI pomology professor Essie Fallahi said.

The Parma center runs orchard trials on crops including almonds, peaches, nectarines, apricots, apples, plums and pears. The work in the irrigated orchards aims to help producers choose varieties and practices that minimize frost risk and get the most benefit from the region's

The April 9 freeze occurred as peaches, almonds and cherries were at early or full bloom stages, he said. Apricots were post-bloom or post petal-fall across the region.

"A lot of people think that after petal fall, fruitlets are less susceptible to frost," Fallahi said. "Not so. They are still very susceptible to frost. That was the case for apricot."

Researchers' analyses and conversations with growers "show there has been moderate to severe damage" to apricots depending on the location, cultivar and bloom stage, he said. Parma saw some moderate to severe damage.

Peaches fared better.

"We think we are OK on peaches," Fallahi said. "We do have some injury — but at the level of natural thinning, which is not a bad thing." Remaining fruit promises to be larger.

He said a need for some thin-

ning also reduces the net impact of "relatively minor" damage to Asian pears, which were at or near full bloom.

Empress Plum orchards are in good shape. They were at 60-75% bloom when freezes occurred depending on the location, Fallahi said. "They have survived very well. I expected that. They survived well in similar conditions in the past."

Honeycrisp was the only apple variety at Parma that saw some damage from recent frosts, he said. The extent is not yet known.

Cherries were from early to about 75% bloom, depending on the site and cultivar. "We have seen some damage even on blossoms that were still closed," Fallahi said. Analysis continues, including whether tree canopy type and size affected the likelihood of freeze injury.

Trail opponents win attorney fees in bridge fight

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Opponents of a recreational trail in Oregon's Yamhill County have won \$47,500 in litigation costs for prevailing in a legal dispute about a bridge along the route.

The county decided against moving forward with the 3-mile "rail-to-trail" project earlier this year after the state's Land Use Board of Appeals blocked the proposal for the third time.

However, the county began building a bridge along the route last year even though LUBA had

overturned a conditional use permit for the trail itself.

Farmers along the trail who opposed the project convinced LUBA to order the bridge construction halted, defeating the county's argument that it was merely an access bridge for fire vehicles that's not subject to land use approval.

The opponents are entitled to their attorney fees and other costs for that portion of the litigation because the county's argument was made "without probable cause to believe that it was well-founded on factual supported information," according to LUBA.

No reasonable lawyer

would conclude the county's position had legal merit and its defenses were "premised on the same unreasonable, post-hoc argument," LUBA said.

The county's claim that the bridge wasn't necessarily a portion of the larger trail and would be used for other purposes is "not supported by anything in the record or the challenged decisions themselves," LUBA said.

The LUBA ruling also rejected the county's argument that awarding attorney fees would result in "basic unfairness" because the opponents waited 84 days after the construction agreement was awarded to challenge the bridge work.

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