

# Housing: ‘The farm acted swiftly and decisively’

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declined to be tested. If suspected cases are included, 14% of workers living in the community had or displayed symptoms of COVID, compared to 7% of the workers in company housing.

The infection rate, according to the report, “was lower in orchard employees residing in congregate temporary housing compared with orchard employees living in the community.”

Workers in company housing may have had less exposure to high-risk community settings, such

as restaurants or indoor events, and adhered better to mask and social distance rules, according to the report, whose listed contributors include the state’s head epidemiologist, Scott Lindquist.

L&I issued the fine months after testing was completed, pointing to violations it witnessed in July. The state alleges the company didn’t isolate workers in groups of 15, allowing groups of 42 workers.

Gebbers argued there was nothing scientific about groups of 15 and that it consulted with an infec-



Courtesy of Gebbers Farms

**Housing at Gebbers Farms in Okanogan County, Wash. A Washington Department of Health investigation found Gebbers workers in company housing were less likely to contract COVID last summer than workers who lived in the community. The farm faces a \$2 million fine for allegedly exposing workers it housed to the coronavirus.**

tious disease expert on a safety plan. The farm has

Appeals. A mediation session is scheduled for next month.

“The farm acted swiftly and decisively to ensure the health and safety of employees in the face of an unprecedented global pandemic, and these efforts are reflected in the lower rates of positive cases for workers living in employee-provided housing,” farm spokeswoman Amy Philpott said in a statement April 22.

Efforts to obtain comment from the Health Department were unsuccessful.

Also, 726 workers in Gebbers warehouses were tested. Some 23% tested positive. All lived in the community.

While 6% of office workers tested positive, 28% of workers who sort and pack fruit tested positive, according to the report.

In late May, the company started testing employees who displayed COVID symptoms. In response to concerns about the virus spreading, the state health secretary ordered all workers to be tested in late August. Less than 1% tested positive at that time.

# Research: Researchers want to identify solutions to immediate problems

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efforts more attractive to outside funding, Jensen said. He estimates the researchers bring in more than \$1 million each year in additional grants.

“It looks really good in federal grant applications to be able to credibly say we’re doing this for the entire region, which represents over half of all U.S. potatoes,” he said.

## Farmers benefit

“As other areas have cut back on research, we’ve been able to expand,” said Ritchey Toevs, a potato farmer in Aberdeen, Idaho.



Chris Voigt

Toevs said his farm has benefited from the consortium’s research on disease management and yield.

Consortium researchers also develop new varieties of potatoes. Umatilla, Ranger and Clearwater potatoes all came out of a tri-state breeding effort funded by the consortium, said Grant Morris, a Pasco farmer who is a member of the Washington Potato Commission.

In addition to breeding new varieties, the consortium helps pay for research into best practices for raising and storing them.

“I will water and fertilize a Clearwater differently than a Ranger,” Morris said. “I have tweaked my program over the years based on the results I see at harvest, but all of it started with what I have learned from the work put in by the researchers funded by the consortium.”

Because of their close ties to the researchers, Northwest potato farmers have a deeper understanding of best practices and how much water it takes to raise their crop compared to others, all of which will be significant for generations to come, Toevs said.

“Just how we allocate resources,” he said. “I think that will help benefit our children.”

## How it started

Cooperative funding for research had been talked about since the 1990s, but didn’t come to fruition until 2012.

Jensen, then director of research at the Washington Potato Commission in Moses Lake, was looking to move to



Aberdeen, Idaho, farmer Ritchey Toevs inspects a potato during his harvest.

Capital Press File



Carlos Gonzalez, center, and Alexa Hintze organize potato seed samples in brown bags April 13 for planting the next day on the Washington State University research farm in Othello, Wash. Francisco Gonzalez passes behind them.

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

## Northwest Potato production and value

State	Acres Harvested 2020	Value
Idaho	299,500	\$1 billion
Oregon	45,000	\$217 million
Washington	154,000	\$781 million
U.S.	914,000	\$3.9 billion

Source: USDA

Idaho.

Rather than lose Jensen, an accomplished entomologist, Washington commission members recalled earlier conversations about teaming up with Idaho and Oregon, and decided to pursue that option,

said Chris Voigt, executive director of the Washington commission.

Now based in Lakeview, Ore., Jensen serves as the liaison between farmers and researchers as the consortium manager.

“Andy knows how to speak both languages,” Voigt said. “Andy can talk the very technical and research side of it on a plethora of different subjects, and he can also talk grower.”

Early concerns that the three commissions might have trouble working together, after a long history of viewing one another as competitors, didn’t prove to be valid, Jensen said.

Which is not to say there isn’t occasional grumbling on issues such as funding research on the potato cyst nematode in Eastern Idaho. The pest is only in that part

of Idaho, and research on it is fairly expensive, Jensen said.

“The bottom line is ... they all understand, even though it’s only located in Idaho, it is a big problem for the whole region, especially if it ever were to spread beyond where it is,” he said.

## Battling zebra chip

Just as the consortium began, the disease zebra chip emerged as a concern for growers.

Zebra chip reduces yields and produces bands in tubers that darken when fried, making infected potatoes unmarketable. The disease is spread by the potato psyllid, a tiny flying insect.

Through consortium-funded research, farmers in the three states were able to respond to the threat the disease posed, Jensen said.

“I think we learned an incredible amount,” he said. “Although zebra chip hasn’t continued to be a serious problem, we know so much about it that I think we’re well-prepared to deal with it if it re-emerges.”

Did the consortium keep the disease from getting worse?

“The honest, straightforward answer is, ‘We don’t know,’” Jensen said. “Obviously, some people would want to take credit for that, but we don’t know. It’s so hard to tell. It could just all be down to luck.”

## New look at old problems

Growers have strict quality standards they have to satisfy, Jensen said. Researchers work to help them meet those standards.

“Can they produce the kind of potato they need to produce for the market place?” he said. “That’s the most important thing. Saving money is good, too.”

Researchers want to identify solutions to immediate problems or questions, such as determining the benefits of potassium fertilizers for new cultivars.

Other problems are longstanding, like the disease powdery scab, which researchers have previously studied. No fungicides or pesticides are available to fight it, Jensen said.

The consortium has invested in basic research that revisits this old problem, using new technology to understand how it interacts with the plant and potentially discover new controls.

Soil health is another focus, including managing soil-borne pathogens, Jensen said.

“I think most people would say the most important thing is being able to produce the quality we need, at a yield that provides the growers adequate income,” Jensen said. “Quality is absolutely top-of-mind.”

## Working together

The consortium’s researchers are “world class,” said Toevs, the Idaho farmer, and are asking questions today that may not produce answers for decades.

“The payback on this level of research is definitely long-term,” he said.

The research is also going to involve more deep dives, he says.

“There isn’t much low-hanging fruit left,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll be able to continue to move the bar.”

WSU’s Pavek said communication between farmers and researchers is good.

“We can get quick, timely solutions to them,” Pavek said. “They have our ear, and vice versa. They can come to us and tell us, ‘Hey, we’re having a problem with this.’”

“Most of the research I have out in the field this year, if not all, are projects that developed out of conversations with growers — or I saw the need before they did.”

# Wolves: All phases require ranchers to use non-lethal deterrents to haze wolves away from herds

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Chronic depredation in Phase I is defined as four confirmed attacks on livestock in six months, after which ODFW can consider killing problem wolves. In Phases II and III, chronic depredation changes to two confirmed kills in nine months.

All phases require ranchers to use non-lethal deterrents to haze wolves away from their herds, such as range riders, flashing lights or alarm boxes.

ODFW confirmed 31 livestock depredations in 2020, up 94% from 2019. However, 16 of those were attributed to the Rogue pack, whose range straddles Jack-



Getty Images

**Four wolves were illegally poached, and three cases are still under investigation.**

son and Klamath counties in southwest Oregon.

While ODFW removed wolves from the state endangered species list in 2015, gray wolves remained federally protected in Western

Oregon during all of 2020.

Over the course of 99 days between July 30 and Nov. 25, ODFW partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA Wildlife Services to limit depredations by the Rogue pack, including coordinated nighttime patrols to haze wolves out of livestock pastures in the Wood River Valley.

Despite those efforts, wolves continued to prey on cattle in the area.

“The personnel costs of this collaboration (with USFWS, USDA and ODFW) were significant during the four months,” Brown said. “We appreciate the work of our partners and all livestock producers for their efforts to co-exist with wolves.”

Ranchers may be compensated for wolf-livestock losses from the Oregon Department of Agriculture’s Wolf Depredation Compensation and Financial Assistance Grant Program. ODA awarded \$251,529 to 12 counties in 2020, up from \$178,319 awarded in 2019. The program also helps pay for purchasing and implementing non-lethal deterrents.

Gray wolves were officially removed from the federal Endangered Species Act across the Lower 48 states in January under a rule finalized by the Trump administration. Six environmental groups have since sued to overturn the delisting.

Sristi Kamal, senior Ore-

gon representative for the group Defenders of Wildlife, said increasing wolf numbers are encouraging, though long-term recovery is still dependent on addressing multiple threats including poaching and pushes for predator control measures.

“We have an opportunity in Oregon to ensure habitat connectivity and establish a landscape where wolves and people are both able to flourish,” Kamal said in a statement. “Defenders of Wildlife is committed to working with agency staff, landowners and ranchers to make this happen.”

There were seven human-caused wolf mortalities in Oregon in 2020, according to ODFW. One wolf was hit

by a vehicle on Interstate 84, and another was hit by a boat while swimming across the Snake River.

Four wolves were illegally poached, and three cases are still under investigation.

The breeding male of the Ruckel Ridge Pack was shot in Umatilla County in May. The breeding male of the Cornucopia Pack was shot in September in Baker County. A subadult wolf, believed to be from the Pine Creek Pack, was shot in October in Baker County.

ODFW staff presented an overview of the Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management 2020 Annual Report to the Fish and Wildlife Commission at its April 23 meeting.