

# Loop: ‘For us, propane heaters were the fall’s version of the toilet paper rush’

Continued from Page 1

Capital Press the Fruit Loop felt like a ghost town.

Ali McLaughlin is a tour guide and founder of MountNBarrel, a company that takes hundreds of people annually on scenic bike tours between farms along the Fruit Loop. Last spring, she said, nearly every group on her reservation list canceled.

“It killed us,” she said.

McLaughlin canceled all remaining tours until June. Tourism picked up over the summer, but at the end of the year, she had made about 80% less revenue than in 2019.

Events that normally support local farmers were canceled, too.

Ashley May, who promotes the loop and was previously executive director of Visit Hood River, a tourism organization, said it was sad to see the Fruit Loop’s two biggest events canceled last year: the spring Cider Fest, which usually brings in 5,000 people, and the weekend Harvest Fest, which draws up to 12,000 people.

The Cider Fest was again canceled this year. A decision has yet to be made about the Harvest Fest.

Revenue loss from those events meant Visit Hood River went from 10 full-time staffers to the equivalent of one-and-a-half staff.

Tourism lodging tax data show the number of overnight guests in the area also dropped — a reduction of almost 100% in spring, and about two-thirds fewer guests than normal during summer.

Hood River winery and vineyard owners, who were required to close tasting rooms several times throughout the year, were especially hard-hit.

## Wy’East Vineyards

The Wy’East Vineyards tasting room is set on a family farm with livestock, farmhouses and pear orchards with a view of Mount Adams to the north.

Mount Hood graces the southern sky, visible from the family’s main vineyard, where vines sprawl across hills about 1,600 feet above sea level — one of Oregon’s highest-elevation vineyards.

Dick and Christie Reed founded the farm in 1992 after shirking city life in Chicago. They, along with daughter Keely Reed Kopetz, now general manager, run the business together.

When Oregon Gov. Kate Brown ordered wine tasting rooms and restaurants to close last spring, Christie Reed says it was “financially devastating.” The main income, Keely Kopetz said, came from generous wine club members.

Fall and winter were especially difficult as wineries statewide rushed to buy tents, outdoor lights and propane heaters when the governor again banned indoor tasting.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

**Trina McAlexander, owner of The Grateful Vineyard and Mt. View Orchards, drives her Gator through an orchard.**



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

**Ciders at The Grateful Vineyard created with fruit from the farm.**

Reed said her family was fortunate to secure heaters when they were in demand.

“For us, propane heaters were the fall’s version of the toilet paper rush,” said Reed. She laughed.

As more Oregonians are getting vaccinated and starting to travel again, Reed and Kopetz say they’re seeing visitation pick up. The winery this spring is already bustling.

“We’re anticipating a really big summer,” said Kopetz.

Kopetz’s optimism is widely shared.

May, the tourism expert, said hotels are surging with overnight bookings again. And McLaughlin, the bike tour guide, said her reservation slots are quickly filling — especially for later in the summer.

“I think it’s gonna be a really, really, really good season,” said McLaughlin.

## Packer Orchards & Bakery

Tammi Packer, co-owner of Packer Orchards & Bakery, said she’s also seeing traffic pick up. About 150 to 200 people per day visited her bakery in April, and momentum is building.

She represents the third generation on a family farm established in 1915.

During springtime, most of Packer’s sales are through her bakery, which sells value-added goods



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

**Keely Reed Kopetz, general manager at Wy’East Vineyards, pours glasses of Pinot noir.**

like jam, honey, pickles and fruit-filled pies. Because pears are Packer’s largest crop, she incorporates pears in nearly every recipe.

In the summer and fall, shoppers also buy seasonal fruits and vegetables from the “farm place” or pick their own in Packer’s U-pick orchards.

Last spring, Packer said, the initial lockdown was scary.

“We were thinking, ‘What are we going to do?’ We really had to be innovative. It seemed like every day we had to make a different big decision,” she said.

COVID prompted Packer’s family to remake their



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

**Ali McLaughlin, founder and tour guide at MountNBarrel, rides past farmland with Mount Hood in the background.**

Packer said focusing on the DTC market was economically good for the farm. Packer Orchards sells only 20% of its pears DTC, with the rest going wholesale, but that 20% volume accounts for 60% of the farm’s pear revenue.

This year, Packer said her family plans to continue expanding the DTC and agritourism arms of the business.

“I think it’s going to be an even busier season,” she said.

## Mt. View Orchards

Trina McAlexander, a third-generation farmer and fermenter, drove a John Deere Gator that kicked up dust as it passed orchard blocks: pears, peaches, 100-year-old apple trees.

McAlexander said she’s grateful her farm is part of the Hood River Fruit Loop, so even when the world went into lockdown, people found her farm through the Fruit Loop website and maps.

“The Fruit Loop honestly has been a lifesaver for us,” she said.

When COVID first hit, McAlexander had just opened “The Grateful Vineyard,” an on-farm winery and tasting room. Using the farm’s fruit, McAlexander had created ciders, beers and wines, while her brother had invented gourmet pizzas and salads using

farm produce. One popular pizza is topped with Bosc pears, bacon, gorgonzola and caramelized onions.

McAlexander said it was sad to close her indoor dining space immediately after opening it, but she was fortunately able to set up outdoor dining in a meadow facing Mount Hood.

Between outdoor visitors to The Grateful Vineyard and farm-direct sales at her farmstand, McAlexander said she saw “no dip in sales” during 2020.

COVID did prompt her to cancel some activities, like hay rides. And many couples who planned to rent the farm space for weddings postponed. The wedding cancellations were hard, McAlexander said, because she uses those revenues to pay for farm inputs, including chemicals and labor expenses.

But 2021, according to McAlexander and other farmers who talked to the Capital Press, is shaping up to be “the year of weddings.”

Like Tammi Packer, McAlexander said the best profit margins come from the DTC market, so she plans to keep expanding her farmstand, food and beverage options and agritourism activities.

Overall, McAlexander said, 2020 was hard but beautiful.

“People just really seemed to rally for American farmers,” she said. “That just melted us last year. I almost want to cry about it. We were growing crops and wondering, ‘Are people going to come and support us farmers?’ And the resounding answer was ‘Yes.’”

## Agritourism takes wing

Farmers, industry experts and community leaders say the Hood River Fruit Loop is just one example of how agritourism is growing in the Pacific Northwest — both before and during the COVID pandemic.

Just a decade ago, wine experts say, the Hood River Valley had only a few vineyards. Today, the region is home to dozens of major vineyards and wineries.

New farms are joining the Fruit Loop each year, including the first meat-only farm in 2021.

Farmers are creating product lines and inventing new on-farm activities. Packer, for example, is in the permitting process for a teaching kitchen, where visitors can take cooking classes.

The pandemic has been hard, but many Fruit Loop farmers say it pushed them to new heights.

“The Fruit Loop is seeing a huge increase in growth, and agritourism seems to be on the rise in general,” said Packer. “I’m excited for what the future holds.”



George Plaven/Capital Press File

**Water flows from Upper Klamath Lake into the A Canal, part of the Klamath Project.**

## Canal: ‘To say that it’s gloomy is a gross understatement’

Continued from Page 1

morning. He said it is the first time in 114 years of operation the A Canal will deliver no water for an entire year.

“To say that it’s gloomy is a gross understatement,” Simmons said. “It’s a devastating situation. It’s going to be bad.”

Reclamation says it has previously committed \$15 million in immediate aid

for agricultural producers through the Klamath Project Drought Response Agency, and an additional \$3 million in technical assistance will be available to tribes for ecosystem activities in the Klamath Basin.

“Reclamation is dedicated to working with our water users, tribes and partners to get through this difficult year and developing long-term solutions for the basin,” Tou-ton said.

## Initiative: ‘Petition is biggest threat to Oregon’s livestock industry’

Continued from Page 1

to collect 112,020 signatures to place the initiative on the November 2022 ballot.

Michelson did not return calls for comment.

According to state law, a person commits animal abuse if they “intentionally, knowingly or recklessly cause physical injury to an animal,” or “cruelly cause the death of an animal,” except when practicing good animal husbandry. The petition seeks to remove that exemption.

“IP13 doesn’t change our definition of abuse, it merely changes who is considered above the law,” the “Yes on IP13” website states.

Cooper said the petition is the biggest threat to Oregon’s livestock industry in decades.

“I think it would leave producers in incredibly uncertain territory,” she said. “It is very dangerous territory for folks.”

Perhaps the cruelest twist, Cooper said, is the effect the initiative would have on 4-H and FFA programs. Animal abuse in Oregon is considered a Class A misdemeanor but is a felony if committed in the presence of a minor child.

“You think of 4-H programs, and people who have artificial insemination programs, and all of a sudden anybody helping them with their projects could be considered a felon,” Cooper said. “That’s just wild.”

Supporters say the initiative would not ban the sale of meat, leather and fur in Oregon.

“It would require that animals be allowed to truly live a good life free from abuse, neglect and sexual assault,” the campaign website states. “After an animal lives a full life, and exits the world naturally and humanely, this initiative does not prohibit a farmer from processing and distributing their body for consumption.”

But Tom Sharp, a Harney County rancher and president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said that is not an economically viable business model for producers.

“How would a producer ever plan on managing a herd of cattle, until some uncertain date when that herd has reached their full and natural lifespan?” Sharp said. “At that point, it’s impractical to take those animals to market for processing.”

Oregon has 13,000 cattle ranchers statewide with 1.3 million head of cattle. In 2019, cattle and calves ranked as

the second-most valuable agricultural commodity, at \$652 million. Sharp said the petition could put those businesses at risk.

“I don’t see, from a business standpoint, how that would pencil out for any of these beef producers,” he said.

The initiative doesn’t only target agriculture. It would also erase animal cruelty exemptions for hunting, fishing, wildlife management, rodeos and scientific research, among others.

Amy Patrick, outreach coordinator for the Oregon Hunters Association, said the initiative is ringing alarm bells and could potentially make hunting illegal in the state.

“It’s an attempt to get at fishing, trapping, hunting and additional wildlife management practices,” Patrick said. “Removing the exemptions would allow them to be classified as animal abuse. ... It’s not animal abuse by any stretch of the imagination.”

Dave Dillon, executive vice president of the Oregon Farm Bureau, said the organization is assembling a broad coalition of groups and businesses to oppose the initiative.

“There is a lot of concern among members,” Dillon said. “It’s going to take a lot of hands. That’s the job ahead of us, and we’ll be ready to do it.”