

Cherry growers race to harvest fruit during record heat wave

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

In a race against nature, cherry growers across the Northwest are scrambling to pick fruit during a record-breaking heat wave.

Across Washington and Oregon, crews have been working night shifts or early mornings to avoid the heat. Some growers are leaving large blocks of fruit on trees to protect work crews or because the fruit, exposed to too much heat too quickly, became overripe.

Growers are moving 500,000 boxes a day, B.J. Thurlby, president of Northwest Cherry Growers, told the Associated Press.

"We're right in the middle of Bing harvest," said Andy Handley, a small-scale orchardist in East Wenatchee, Wash. "(The heat) couldn't have come at a worse time."

His region is picking the last Rainiers, is in the thick of Bing harvest and has yet to begin picking later varieties, including Sweethearts and Skeenas.

According to the National Weather Service, Wenatchee has been in triple-digit heat since June 26: 107 degrees



Capital Press File

The heat wave has forced cherry pickers to work at nights or the early mornings to avoid high temperatures.

Fahrenheit the 27th, 108 the 28th and 115 projected for the 29th.

With nights in the 80- to 90-degree range, most cherries have had no opportunity for overnight chilling, crucial for size development and firmness. The heat has also hastened sugar development, meaning cherries ripen all at once, compressing the harvest timeline.

"When it gets so hot, the fruit stops growing. And then it just starts to cook on the trees," said Handley.

In one orchard, Handley

walked away from 40,000 pounds — about 30% of that orchard's crop.

Handley, whose crew is starting at 4:30 a.m. daily, is also short on labor.

Growers across Wenatchee and Yakima say because California's cherry harvest started late, picking crews have been late to arrive in Washington.

Kirstjn Eggers, another small-scale Wenatchee grower, is missing half of her usual crew because many of her "regulars" are still picking farther south.

Eggers' crew the past few nights has started picking at 7 p.m. and worked until 2 or 4 a.m.

"We've had a lot of over-ripe fruit due to the heat and shortage of pickers," she said.

Some large operations with more established H-2A visa worker programs are faring better.

Teah Smith, entomologist and ag consultant at Yakima-based Zirkle Fruit Co., said Zirkle has a relatively strong labor force this season, with 250 pickers in the orchards.

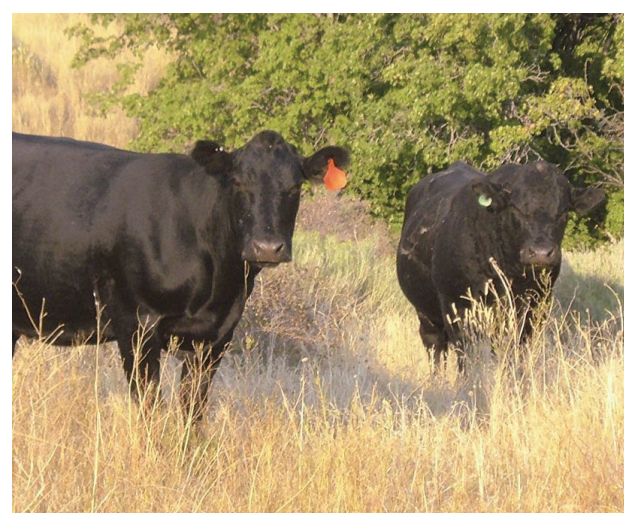
The crews, she said, have been working from about 2 a.m. to 11 a.m.

"I think there will be some damage from heat," she said.

In Oregon, the Dalles region is also under a triple-digit heat warning June 26 through July 4.

"We have never experienced these temperatures in June before," said Brenda Thomas, grower and president of Orchard View Farms in the Dalles.

Thomas said she's prioritizing worker health and safety, only picking from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m.



Capital Press File

Cattle graze in Idaho. USDA is offering help to some Idaho ranchers in drought-stricken counties.

Ranchers in drought stricken central Idaho qualify for USDA aid

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

USDA is making drought-related emergency assistance available to livestock producers in Idaho's Blaine and Lincoln counties.

This is the second consecutive low-water year in much of the central Idaho mountains.

USDA in late June announced cost-share assistance is available under the Emergency Conservation Program, which its Farm Service Agency administers.

Areas of extreme drought, which the U.S. Drought Monitor labels D3, qualify. USDA said in an announcement that a lack of moisture over an extended period caused producers in Blaine and Lincoln counties to "suffer from the effects of severe drought conditions" and prompted program approval.

Sam Bingham, FSA executive director for Jerome, Lincoln and Blaine counties, told Capital Press that Blaine hit D3 last fall, late in the 2020 qualification period, and remains in that category. Lincoln did not hit D3 last year and has not done so in 2021 to date.

He said he included Lincoln County in the request because producers there are impacted by Blaine County's extreme drought upstream.

The Emergency Conservation Program covers up to 75% of the cost of permanent mitigation work and half the cost of temporary measures. It is limited to \$500,000 per person or legal entity per natural disaster. Only farms or ranches that had adequate livestock watering systems or facilities before the drought are eligible.

USDA said there must be adequate range or pasture residue for livestock in the area to be served by a proposed water facility at the time of the request.

Approved measures for making more water available to livestock may include installing pipelines or other facilities, building or deepening wells, and developing springs or seeps.

Bingham said 10 to 30 producers applied when the program was available locally in past years. Producers this year should contact the local FSA office promptly because many applicants and project types are expected, he said.

The office, at 310 W. Nez Perce Ave. in Jerome, will accept cost-share requests from July 1 to Aug. 15. Producers cannot start projects before filing a request and getting an on-site inspection.

Information: 208-944-3629 or samuel.bingham@usda.gov.

High temperatures worry berry growers

By GEORGE PLAGEN
Capital Press

AURORA, Ore. — Unseasonably hot weather in Oregon's Willamette Valley has berry farmers on edge ahead of what figures to be a frenetic harvest.

With triple-digit temperatures June 26-28, Bernadine Strik, extension berry crops specialist for Oregon State University, said last week growers were trying to pick ripe fruit that could be damaged by the scorching heat.

Berries typically do not fare well under such conditions, Strik said. Raspberries and blackberries may dry out and become sunburned, making them unmarketable.

The heat can also cause berries to stick on the plant during machine harvesting, resulting in lower efficiency and yield.

Blueberries, too, can be sunburned if not managed properly, Strik said. How much crop damage growers experience remains to be seen, and may depend on a variety of factors including differences in berry varieties and micro-climates.

"As you can imagine, growers are kind of anxious," Strik said. "There is just not much they can do but wait and see with many of these crops."

Strik, who works at the OSU North Willamette Research and Extension



George Plagen/Capital Press File

Sprinklers irrigate blueberries on a hot summer afternoon at Berries Northwest north of Albany, Ore., in the Willamette Valley.

Center in Aurora, Ore., said a crew arrived June 24 to begin hand-picking organic blueberries on research plots, and machine harvesting of blackberries and raspberries was to follow.

Certain types of early-ripening blueberries, such as Duke, are more heat-resistant than later-season cultivars, Strik said. However, researchers have not had much of a chance to test Duke under extreme heat.

"Our growers are just going to do what they can," Strik said.

For fresh market blueberries, Strik said most growers have dual irrigation systems that include overhead sprinklers designed to keep the plant canopy cool when temperatures rise above 90-95 degrees — a process known as evaporative cooling.

Strik recommended growers turn on their evaporative cooling systems for 20 minutes every hour when temperatures

hit the 90-95 degree benchmark to prevent sunburn.

Most blackberry and raspberry growers, however, do not have evaporative cooling systems, Strik said, leaving them with no way to mitigate sunburn. Instead, she expects they will be machine harvesting more frequently to stay ahead of any potential crop damage.

Strik also suggested growers do their machine harvesting either at night or as early in the morning as possible to avoid the problem of berries sticking on the cane.

"That's the only thing our growers can really do," she said.

Matt Unger, of Unger Farms, said they are used to fighting summertime heat, but 100-degree days in June is "very unusual."

Unger Farms grows about 140 acres of blackberries, raspberries, strawberries and blueberries in Cornelius, Ore., 23 miles west of Portland. The

fruit is all for fresh market, sold in New Seasons grocery stores, local farmers markets and U-pick.

Harvest is mostly finished for June-bearing strawberries, Unger said. The farm also grows ever-bearing strawberries, which produce fruit from late May into November.

Next up, Unger said, is blueberries. He said last week crews were to begin arriving June 24 to pick the fruit, though with labor shortages he wondered how quickly they could get the work done.

"Hopefully, we'll have enough pickers show up," he said.

In the meantime, Unger said the farm has sprinkler systems set up for both blueberries and cane berries, which they will use to beat the heat.

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