

# Fruit industry faces challenges over virus

By COURTNEY SHERWOOD  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

The strawberries have just begun to bud at Liepold Farms in Boring.

If this were a normal year, brother and sister Jeff Liepold and Michelle Krummenacker would be tending the grounds and preparing for early May harvest, just as their parents and grandparents did before them. But as with many things in the era of COVID-19, this year is far from normal.

For the first time in this third-generation family farm, it's not clear if the migrant workers who harvest strawberries each spring will be allowed to travel north from California to work the fields. And if those fieldworkers do arrive, Krummenacker said, the family does not know how it will sell its prized Hoods this year — or whether one of the farm's biggest customers will still be buying its other Oregon-grown fruits.

"I think people take it for granted when you go to the store, like, 'Oh, there's food here' — and it takes a lot of time, energy and work to get things from our field to that place," she said.

Across the Pacific Northwest, small and mid-sized farms are grappling with a range of challenges brought about by the novel coronavirus.

In eastern Washington, potato farmers are planting less as demand for restaurant french fries evaporates, and apple growers are worried about a drop in overseas exports. In Hood River, tree fruit farmers have led Spanish-language training on social distancing and they're worried about selling this year's harvest. And at a dryland wheat farm near Helix, the owner said he's in better shape than many of his peers, with almost no impact from COVID-19.

The good news for Northwest consumers: Despite all the uncertainty affecting growers across the region, experts say the food supply is sound, with growers in California and Florida reporting abundant crops. The supply chain, on the other hand, has been challenged. Growers used to selling to restaurant chains and school cafeterias have been unable to quickly pivot to sell to supermarkets instead. Access to freshly harvested local fruits and vegetables from small and medium-sized farms? That is not a sure thing.

"Many people are worried about a possible recession or even an economic depression stemming from COVID-19, and the agricultural industry is not immune from that, by any means," said Samantha Bayer, an attorney who specializes in policy with the Oregon Farm Bureau. "The agricultural industry has essentially been in a recession



Bryan M. Vance/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Apples for sale at the Liepold Farms produce stand in Boring. The produce stand, which sells the farm's organic berries in season, operates for about 10 months each year.

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Michelle Krummenacker | worker at a family farm in Boring

for the last three to four years because of declining market prices and regulatory overhead, and many producers may not survive the effects of COVID-19."

It's hard to know which of the financial challenges that have presented themselves to Liepold Farms is the most pressing. There's the push to upgrade conditions for fieldworkers; new packaging and food safety standards from fast-food chain Burgerville, one of the farm's biggest customers; and uncertainty around farmers markets amid social distancing and hygiene concerns.

"There are so many things coming in to play that we are reeling, really," said Marcia Liepold, Krummenacker's mother. "It's just mind boggling to put this all in order."

The biggest unknown facing Liepold Farms and other farms across the region comes in the form of a petition that advocates for low-income and immigrant communities submitted to the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration in March. The Oregon Law Center and Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center asked

for more portable toilets and hand-washing stations in fields — one for every five workers, instead of one for every 20, as required today. They also asked for upgrades to migrant housing, including vacant spaces dedicated to housing any workers who get sick while on the job.

"If they require a sink for every five people, if we have a crew of 60, are we going to have 11 or 12 washing stations that cost \$400 to \$500 apiece? And that's just washing stations," Liepold said. "And you can't wait to the last minute to get these, you have to spend the money upfront."

Other upgrades sought in the petition could cost \$40,000 or more, Krummenacker said. Yet many years, the farm's payout to its owners is only \$50,000 or \$60,000 after expenses, she said.

Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, or PCUN, a union for Oregon farmworkers, has focused its COVID-19 advocacy on job protections, access to health care and sanitation advocacy such as deep-cleaning of immigrant housing, rather

than on the specific investments requested in the OSHA petition.

Reyna Lopez, executive director of PCUN, said that immigrant workers depend on economically viable farms to be able to make a living. But they still need to be protected.

"Oregon is one of the most vibrant agricultural economies in the world, and for us that would mean devastating effects to have our agriculture industry knocked down by COVID-19," she said.

Oregon OSHA administrator Michael Wood told Oregon Public Broadcasting he's gathering feedback from farms and considering the health needs that farmworkers face. He expects to act quickly on the petition.

"Given that this petition comes up specifically in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, it does not allow us to use as deliberative a process as we normally would," Wood said. "And if we move forward with rule-making, it wouldn't make sense to do our normal practice of providing 60 to 180 days, or sometimes even a year, between rule adoption and the effective date. If we do this, it is something we'll need to have come into place quickly."

Until then, Liepold and Krummenacker do not know what — if anything — to do to prepare for workers who typically begin the strawberry harvest in May.

Liepold Farms is also facing changes from Burgerville, which is one of its largest buyers. The fresh fruit in the fast-food chain's strawberry and raspberry shakes, and its seasonal marionberry products, all come from the family farm.

"Historically, we've been able to pick fresh and deliver berries to a site that redistributes to all their stores with a fresh-packed product," Krummenacker said. Within 12 hours, fresh berries go from farm to customers.

But Burgerville recently informed the farm that it wants to add a middle step to ensure food safety along the way. That might work for shelf-stable berries grown on large corporate farms, but the berries Liepold Farms grows have been bred to be at their peak flavor within three days of harvest. Delaying delivery to the fast-food chain could put an end to sweet and flavorful Liepold-grown berry shakes, Krummenacker said.

With so much uncertainty about even the next few weeks, Krummenacker and Liepold said plans to pass ownership of the family farm on to the next generation may have to be put on hold for several years.

"We worked so hard to keep our farm," Liepold said. "This year we were supposed to be retiring. This has thrown that off."

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