

HERMISTON

Waiting on watermelons

Harvest expected mid-July

By GEORGE PAVLEN
East Oregonian

July Fourth is just around the corner, and that means famous Hermiston watermelons — in all their sweet, juicy glory — are almost back in season.

This year's melon crop may have gotten off to a slow start compared to recent years, but growers say they are making up ground quickly as temperatures have started rising above 90 degrees during the heat of day.

Jack Bellinger, owner of Bellinger Farms, said watermelons fell behind early following a cool and wet spring, which impacted both the timing of planting and limited the number of hot days needed for the plants to absorb energy.

A recent stretch of warmer weather, including a record high of 101 degrees on Monday, has helped to speed things up, Bellinger said. Still, he is looking at beginning harvest July 12-14, which is about a week later than usual.

"The name of the game for all crops is heat units," Bellinger said. "They've been pretty hit and miss."

Patrick Walchli, of Walchli Farms, also figures to push back harvest by a week to 10 days, though he is not alarmed. Weather patterns like this aren't unheard of for the region, Walchli said, and he is not expecting any problems with yield or quality.

"The crop, for the weather we've had at this stage, looks pretty nice," Walchli said. "I expect the melons will be just as good of quality as ever."

Watermelons are an iconic crop for Hermiston, thriving in the region's sandy soils and desert climate. Once summer rolls around, the plants spend all day soaking up the hot sun, which they convert into sugar as a source of energy. Having chilly nights allows the fruit to retain all that sugary goodness.

Hermiston watermelons can be found all over the Northwest, including Portland and Seattle, and have been shipped as far as Maryland and Texas.

Given their immense popularity, it is no surprise that Scott Lukas has chosen to include watermelons as part of his research program at Oregon State University's Hermiston Agricultural



Staff photo by George Pavlen
Scott Lukas, assistant professor of horticulture at Oregon State University, checks on his watermelon trials Thursday at the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Experiment Station.

Research and Extension Center south of town.

Lukas, who was hired as the station horticulturist last year, is experimenting with different treatments for soil-borne Fusarium and Verticillium wilt that can infect watermelon vines, causing them to wither and die.

Most growers use chemical fumigants to keep the diseases in check. For his trial, Lukas is treating the plants with a couple of alternative products that, if successful, could be cheaper and more environmentally friendly than traditional fumigants without impacting yield, he said.

"That's the idea, trying different combinations of green chemistries to solve a common issue this region's watermelon growers face," Lukas said.

It is still too early to measure results, though Lukas is optimistic. The experiment, which involves irrigating roughly 800 watermelon plants, was not launched until late June, and the melons themselves are still no larger than the size of a bean.

Lukas said growers have been cooperative and enthusiastic about the project, which he intends to expand next year over several acres.

"It is using a potentially cheaper product, and one that has less environ-

mental restrictions and consequences," he said.

Prior to hiring Lukas, HAREC was without a horticulturist for about five years. While the station is still primarily known for its work with potatoes, Lukas has made it clear he sees plenty of potential for high-value crop diversification across the Columbia Basin.

"We have affordable land prices. We have plentiful water. We have good soils. And we have good distribution as well, in terms of corridors to ship food out," Lukas said.

Apart from watermelons, Lukas' program also involves projects with onions, blueberries, sweet corn and broccoli. Lukas may eventually look at the possibility of growing tree fruit and nuts around Hermiston, though he said that research is likely a few years away from happening.

Lukas said he is getting good feedback from local growers who previously didn't have a lot of resources available for specialty crops at HAREC.

"I want to do what the growers need," he said. "That's where this program is and where it's going to go."

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PENDLETON

Whisky Fest passes 2016 ticket sales

East Oregonian

The Pendleton Whisky Music Fest is being advertised as "The Best Day of Summer," and it's set to be an especially lucrative one, too.

Co-organizer Doug Corey said Whisky Fest has already sold 4,500 more tickets than it did last year and is on track to fill all of its 16,500 seats for the July 15 concert at the Round-Up grounds.

Corey declined to say how many tickets were left, but as headliner Maroon 5 and opening acts MAGIC! and Runaway June return some of their ticket allotments, Whisky Fest organizers are opening up tickets to fans.

The Whisky Fest website shows seat availability in several sections, including seats in the grandstands and premium seats on the arena grass.

Although the staging was reconfigured to accommodate Maroon 5 and some

more seating was added, Corey attributed the growth to last year's event.

"We kind of got a little reputation that it was a great event," he said.

Corey said 2016's headliner — Zac Brown Band — might have sold just as many tickets if they led the 2017 event.

With more people expected in town, Whisky Fest wants to give them something to do if they arrive in Pendleton on Friday. Organizers have added a free kickoff party on July 14 on Main Street.

Corey said visitors could come to downtown Pendleton for the farmers market before moving on to the party, which runs from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m.

The party will feature performances from DJ Govern-T, who will also DJ at the Saturday concert between sets, and The FrogHollow Band, a Walla Walla group that performs original songs and country covers.

HERMISTON



Staff photo by Jayati Ramakrishnan
Members of the UCFD #1 board and Blue Mountain Community College get ready to break ground on the new training tower at the fire district's Station 23 on Westland Road.

New fire training tower breaks ground

East Oregonian

Come September, the Umatilla County Fire District will stand a little taller.

Or at least one of their buildings will. The district broke ground Thursday on a four-story training tower at Station 23 on 78760 Westland Road. The structure will allow the district to conduct live fire training, search-and-rescue scenarios and other exercises.

Board members from the fire district and Blue Mountain Community College were on hand to celebrate. Passage of a bond for BMCC two years ago will provide 47

percent of the funding for the tower. The rest will be funded by UCFD.

Casey White-Zollman, BMCC's vice president of public relations, said the tower will be a great service to the college's fire science program.

"It will be an essential part of the hands-on training our students go through," she said.

UCFD Board Chair Rick Sherman said the tower would allow the firefighters to do a better job serving the community, and keep themselves safer, too.

"The most important resource we have for our fire department is our people," he said.

Irrigon man dies in car crash

By East Oregonian

An Irrigon man died and a woman was injured Thursday in a single car crash in Irrigon, according to the Morrow County Sheriff's Office.

According to the sheriff's dispatch office, the vehicle was traveling westbound on Columbia Lane around 5:20 p.m. Thursday when the driver lost control for unknown reasons near the intersection with W.

Eighth Road.

The vehicle rolled twice and both people in the vehicle were ejected. Neither were wearing a seatbelt, according to the sheriff's office.

Rafael Garza, 23, of Irrigon, was pronounced dead at the scene. Katelyn Tolar, 18, also of Irrigon, was injured and transported to Good Shepherd Hospital, Hermiston with serious injuries. It was not immediately known who was driving the vehicle.

Oregon oil train bill moves to floor

Language to increase regulation removed again

By TONY SCHICK
Oregon Public Broadcasting

For the second time since 2015, the Oregon Legislature has stripped language out of a bill that would have increased the state's regulation of oil trains.

Oregon has the weakest regulations among West Coast states.

A year after a Union Pacific oil train derailed and caught fire in the Columbia River Gorge town of Mosier, lawmakers are advancing to the House and Senate floors House Bill 2131, sponsored by Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland.

The bill moves money toward oil train emergency preparations, particularly toward known gaps in Central Oregon. Smith Warner called the bill "a huge step in our ability to maintain safer routes and safer communities."

But it fails to give the state authority over railroads' emergency plans, and adds layers of secrecy for railroad operations.

"I believe the leadership and also the bill sponsor buckled under railroad pressure. Even just one year after the derailment and fire in Mosier, they started weakening the bill," said Michael Lang, conservation director for Friends of the Columbia Gorge.

Oversight removed
The original version of HB 2131 would have given the state's Department of Environmental Quality the authority to approve or deny railroad contingency plans for oil train spills. It also would have required tests and drills to make sure railroads could execute the plans.

That's the same regulatory oversight Oregon has over other forms of oil transport, such as pipelines and marine terminals.

The original bill also would have created a fee on rail carriers. The estimated \$375,000 per year generated by the fee would have gone toward oil train emergency

response planning.

Railroads lobbied against the bill and claimed, as they have in previous sessions, that it was invalidated by federal railroad safety and commerce laws. In later amendments, the bill was rewritten to remove the fee and DEQ's legal authority over the railroads.

The current version specifies railroad contingency plans submitted to the state are not subject to DEQ approval. If the plans do not meet state standards, the department cannot impose new requirements. Instead, it can try for changes "by conference, conciliation or persuasion."

The bill also specifies railroads can move oil trains through Oregon even if they fail to provide a plan.

"Union Pacific worked hand-in-hand with legislative leadership this session in a bipartisan effort to continue enhancing safe rail movement of crude oil," Union Pacific spokesman Justin Jacobs said.

Smith Warner said after Mosier, there were calls for major rule changes on oil trains, but she and other lawmakers ran up against limitations in federal law.

"I cannot emphasize enough how challenging it is to do state level work with railroads. Because they have the power of 200 years of federal preemption legislation on their side," she said.

Other states have found a way past some of those limitations, including California and Washington.

"Washington and California get the same plan. Legally, they operate in a similar area. They ask for the plans, they receive the plans," Smith Warner said. "They cannot prohibit them from running through the state, same as us."

Washington does go a step beyond just receiving plans, however. Regulators there have the ability to approve or deny plans. If railroads do not

comply, they can issue civil penalties.

Smith Warner and others worried how such laws would hold up in court.

The legislative council report on HB 2131 said it largely tracks with current laws in Washington and Minnesota, which have not yet been challenged. But the report added "it is possible that certain provisions of the bill, if enacted, would face scrutiny in court."

Lawmakers later removed those pieces, the same ones railroads opposed. They also added some that the railroads wanted.

Secrecy added
HB 2131 would conceal information railroads provide to the state from public scrutiny.

It states that railroad contingency oil spill plans provided to DEQ would be exempt from public records requests and not disclosed to anyone outside of a few select government agencies.

In addition, it states, "no subpoena or judicial order may be issued compelling the disclosure of a contingency plan, except when relevant to a proceeding where compliance by an owner or operator of a high hazard train route with this section is to be adjudicated."

That same secrecy provision is established for a section of the bill requiring railroads to provide proof of financial responsibility, showing they can cover the cost of an oil train derailment. Those would be filed with the Oregon State Fire Marshal.

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