

Christmas tree growers grapple with tight supplies

Oregon had 383 licensed growers selling about 4.6 million trees in 2018

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
EO Media Group

SALEM — A large semitrailer backed into the outdoor shipping yard on Monday afternoon at BTN of Oregon, where workers loaded tightly wrapped Christmas trees for delivery to stores and tree lots from California to Texas and across the border into Mexico.

BTN of Oregon grows approximately 2,500 acres of Christmas trees east of Salem, including popular Noble and Douglas firs. Business is moving practically nonstop as the calendar flips to December.

"A lot of praying goes on this time of year," said Ben Stone, president of the family-owned company. "A lot of sleepless nights."

Tight supplies are again challenging Christmas tree vendors as the industry continues to recover from a massive glut of cheap trees in the mid-2000s that caused wholesale prices to crash, forcing hundreds of Northwest farms to go out of business or switch to less labor-intensive crops.

Stone, who runs BTN of Oregon with his brothers, Tyler and Nathan, said they are receiving calls daily from people they've never talked to before looking for trees.



Workers load Christmas trees into a truck on Dec. 2, 2019, at BTN of Oregon near Salem.

"We just can't help," Stone said. "It's unfortunate."

Oregon is the leading producer of Christmas trees nationwide, with 383 licensed growers selling about 4.6 million trees in 2018, according to estimates from Oregon State University.

That is down significantly over the last decade, when there were more than 750 growers producing 8 million trees each year.

Chal Landgren, a Christmas tree specialist for OSU at the

North Willamette Research and Extension Center, said there are fewer trees available now to keep up with the usual demand.

"We're coming off a period where too many trees were planted and a lot of growers have gone out of business because of the boom-and-bust cycle," Landgren said.

As supplies have dropped, the average price for trees has also increased. Sales data from the National Christmas Tree Association show that, between 2015 and

2018, retail prices rose 23% from \$62 to \$73 — including a 5% jump last year.

Landgren said the 2019 market is looking a lot like 2018, and he doesn't see much relief on the way. The situation was compounded by unusually hot and dry summers in Oregon's Willamette Valley the past two years that led to higher seedling mortality rates for trees, he added.

"Most Christmas trees are grown without irrigation," Land-

gren said. "Growers who had particularly a large amount of Noble fir that was planted ... they had real high mortality rates. Some people lost their entire plantings for those years."

Driving around the area, Landgren said families should still have plenty of options at U-cut tree lots, though he recommended getting out early to find the perfect tree.

In addition to the wholesale venture, BTN of Oregon operates a U-cut Christmas tree lot named Tree Kings Farms. The lot celebrated its opening weekend the day after Thanksgiving, and will remain open through Dec. 22.

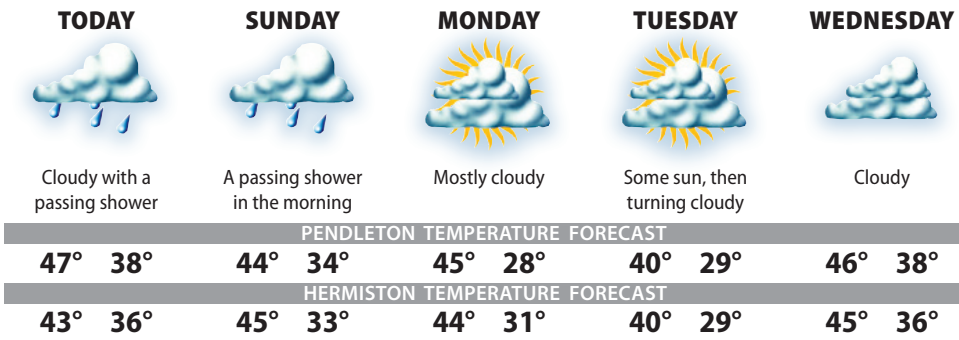
"We have a good supply of trees for the U-cut," Tyler Stone said. "It's definitely not an issue."

Ben, Tyler and Nathan Stone took over the family business from their father, Mike, who got his start in the Christmas tree industry more than 60 years ago. Despite recent challenges, the brothers say 2019 was a good year for growing conditions, plentiful labor and transportation at the farm.

One major concern with the wholesale shortage is whether people will be driven to buy an artificial tree, Ben and Tyler said. The industry has supported a check-off program of 15 cents per tree, which goes toward promoting and marketing live Christmas trees.

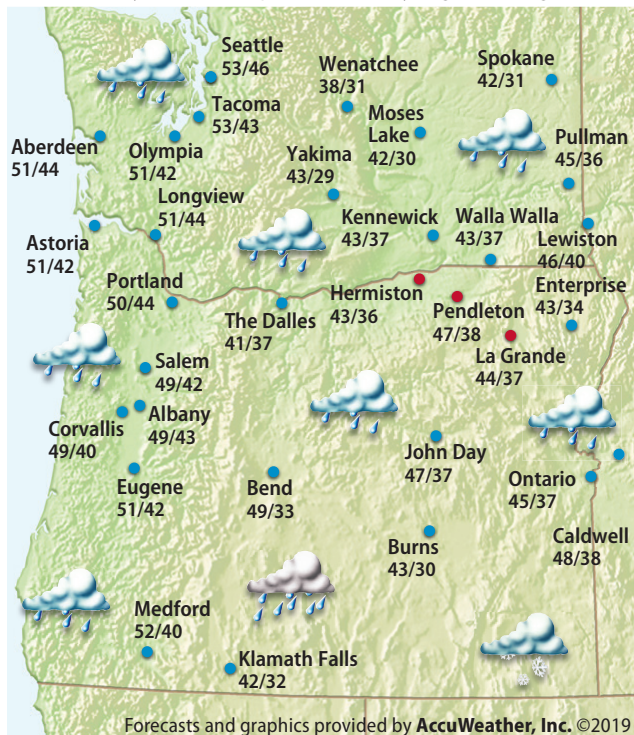
"We're trying to get our message out there, that our product is more environmentally friendly than the China-made plastic (trees), he said.

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



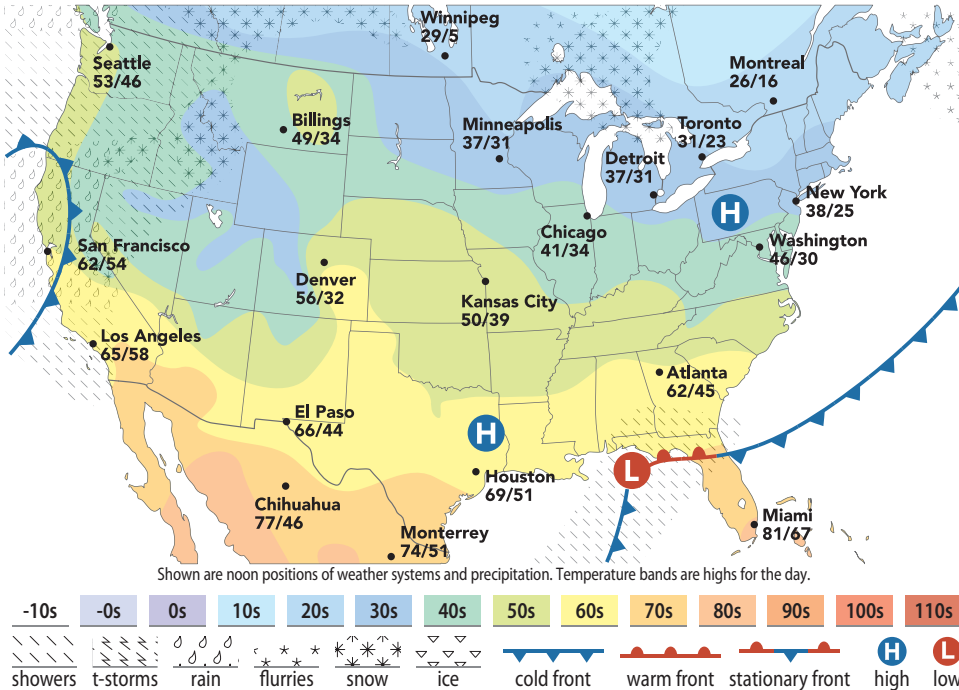
ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.		
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	41°	28°
Normals	40°	27°
Records	65° (1987)	0° (2013)
PRECIPITATION		
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"	
Month to date	0.01"	
Normal month to date	0.27"	
Year to date	11.59"	
Last year to date	8.88"	
Normal year to date	11.74"	
HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.		
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	35°	29°
Normals	41°	28°
Records	62° (1945)	1° (2013)
PRECIPITATION		
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"	
Month to date	Trace	
Normal month to date	0.32"	
Year to date	4.95"	
Last year to date	6.97"	
Normal year to date	8.79"	
WINDS (in mph)		
Today	Sun.	
Boardman	NW 3-6	NNW 3-6
Pendleton	S 4-8	W 4-8
SUN AND MOON		
Sunrise today	7:21 a.m.	
Sunset tonight	4:11 p.m.	
Moonrise today	2:10 p.m.	
Moonset today	2:21 a.m.	
Full Last New First		
Dec 11 Dec 18 Dec 25 Jan 2		

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)
High 85° in Reserve, La. Low -5° in Grand Forks, N.D.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Double murderer dies in Salem prison

By **JAYSON JACOBY**
EO Media Group

BAKER CITY — A man convicted of a double murder in Baker County more than 40 years ago died Wednesday morning in the infirmary at the Oregon State Penitentiary, where he was serving a life sentence.

Donald Douglas Hull, 79, had been in custody at the state penitentiary in Salem since Jan. 24, 1977, according to a press release from the Oregon Department of Corrections.

Hull was convicted of the murder of Darlene Hull, 31, and her daughter, Tamera Shove, 13, on Aug. 13, 1976.

Darlene Hull was formerly Donald Hull's sister-in-law, having divorced his brother in 1975. Donald Hull had also lived with Darlene,

according to contemporary newspaper stories.

Buzz Colton of Baker City remembers the murder case, and probably more vividly than most people.

Colton and his father, Frank Colton, were members of the Baker County Sheriff's Posse in August 1976, and they found the bodies of Hull and Shove in what Buzz describes as a manger on an abandoned farm on the east side of Baker Valley near Sunnyslope Road.

Buzz, now 84, said Sheriff Delmar Dixon assigned him and his father, on Aug. 14, 1976, the day Hull was arrested in Portland, to search the area east of the Baker City Airport because it was one that Hull was known to frequent.

Another was the Virtue Mine area south of Flag-

staff Hill, where the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center now stands.

Colton said he and his father decided to start their search at the former Opal Cooper farm near the intersection of Sunnyslope Road and Airport Road, about 4 miles northeast of Baker City. They parked near the empty house on the farm in the early afternoon.

Buzz said he and his father peered into the house but saw nothing unusual.

They walked to a small shed nearby. Buzz said he went to the rear of the structure and looked through a gap in the weathered boards of the dilapidated building.

He saw two bodies. Buzz yelled for his father.

They ran to their vehicle and used the CB radio to call the sheriff's office.

BRIEFLY

Man fights extradition to Oregon on child sex charges

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — A 23-year-old Seattle man fighting extradition to Oregon on child sex charges was released in Walla Walla on Wednesday.

Benjamin R. Katz was arrested locally Tuesday afternoon by Washington State Patrol troopers, who took him to Walla Walla County Jail on a suspected fugitive charge.

He appeared in Walla Walla County Superior Court on Wednesday morning on the fugitive charge and charges from Clackamas County Circuit Court, including using a child in display of sexually explicit conduct, first-degree sexual abuse, second-degree online sexual corruption of a child, luring a minor, second-degree attempted sexual abuse, and two counts of harassment, records stated.

Katz was indicted Nov. 12 in the Clackamas County Circuit Court on the charges, and a warrant was issued indicating the state would extradite Katz from anywhere in the U.S., records stated.

Defense attorney Robin Olson was appointed Wednesday to represent Katz, and his release conditions were determined, including \$250,000 bond, which he posted later that day.

Walla Walla County Prosecuting Attor-

ney Jim Nagle said Katz's extradition hearing was scheduled for Dec. 30.

Teen charged with urinating in classmate's water bottle

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — A Touchet, Washington, teenager has been accused of assaulting a classmate by peeing in the youth's water bottle.

The 15-year-old Touchet High School student was charged with second-degree assault, a felony, in late November for the alleged crime on Sept. 19, according to court records.

Walla Walla County Sheriff's Office deputies responded to the school at 4:51 p.m. that day, where District Superintendent Robert Elizondo told them about the incident, records stated.

The boy was caught by surveillance cameras in the locker room, Elizondo told them, and wasn't supposed to be there at the time, records stated. He also told them the suspect confessed to him, however the boy refused to talk to deputies, except to say he "was sorry; it was was a stupid mistake."

The victim, another boy, didn't know about the urine until he drank from the water bottle and swallowed it, records stated.

— Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

CORRECTIONS: The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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