

Orchard:

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“But then the weather started getting cold,” he said. “It’s possible 50% of the cherries didn’t even get pollinated. It was the start of apples last week; it’s possible those aren’t getting pollinated, either.”

Although there’s little he can do to control the weather, Dibble uses a number of tools to try to keep his orchards and grapes warm enough to avoid frost damage.

Along with some common tools of the trade, he uses some less common tactics, including a mobile wind machine he can shuffle around to the area that needs it most, or the line of propane-fueled heaters he used to get his vineyard off the ground.

A warm-blooded farmer

Dibble comes by his willingness to experiment naturally. His grandfather Aaron Weis, for whom Dibble’s farm is named, was the first in the Valley to combat frost with wind machines.

By the mid-1960s, Weis had installed wind machines, giant fans that push warmer air down to the ground and delay the loss of heat, a tool that had by then proven popular in California’s citrus orchards.

Even on cold nights, moving slightly warmer air from the inversion layer back down to the ground can make the crucial difference for the crop.

“Last week, when we had that windy, snowy, rainy day, we weren’t getting much heat in the ground,” Dibble said. “But wind is way better than dead still. When you have dead-still calm like you do on those really cold nights, that will mess you up more than anything.”



Greg Lehman/Walla Walla Union-Bulletin
Dana Dibble talks about his propane orchard heating system, April 19, 2022.

While Dibble also uses the traditional machines, including one of the originals installed by his grandfather, he also uses a mobile unit that folds and unfolds using hydraulics. While it is significantly smaller than the older models, it makes up for this shortcoming with adaptability and price point.

While a new mobile wind machine would have run nearly \$30,000, he bought his used for \$12,000, parking it next to his peach trees. In a year where many people lost tree fruit to weather conditions, Dibble sold 1,400 boxes of peaches in 2021, much of which he credits to the mobile machine.

The wind from the machine functions in tandem with the heat produced with other components in Dibble’s frost-free system, including the heat radiated from irrigation water pumped in at 55 degrees.

He also uses diesel-fueled smudge pots, a traditional type of heater, and detachable heaters connected to a propane line, a system Dibble

purchased from Hood River-area contractor AgHeat.

Heaters aren’t a rare sight in orchards, but Dibble originally bought AgHeat’s propane units 16 years ago to protect the young grape vines of his River Rock Vineyard, an unusual gambit. The young grapes can get wiped out by a hard winter, and Dibble’s kept dying.

While the wind machines can help provide a layer of protection to the vines as easily as the trees, a cold wind blowing in hard from the Blue Mountains in winter can overcome them.

“And that would kill us,” Dibble said. “But the warmth off the heaters would go up in the air, and that drift would kind of carry to (the nearby) machine. So if you have heaters, you create your own inversion.”

This system isn’t perfect — it’s an expensive investment, the heaters can malfunction, and it’s labor intensive, so Dibble doesn’t often use the vineyard units anymore. Instead, he does what most vineyard man-

agers do, simply laying the canes down, a method of fortifying the vine during winter that also is labor intensive.

But the unusual heaters helped to get Dibble’s fledgling vineyard off the ground, he said, and he has recently begun to hear from growers as far afield as Chile interested in his system.

Each component helps to diversify and strengthen A. Weis Farms’ frost-free system, Dibble noted, a business philosophy evident in the wide variety of fruits the land produces: cherries, apples, apricots, peaches, grapes and U-pick raspberries. If any particular component fails, the others are there to pick up the slack, Dibble said.

While pollination concerns may prove to be problematic for this year’s crop, Dibble’s fruit seems to have survived the spring frost that descended on the Valley earlier this month, due in part to the heaters, irrigation, wind machines — and, of course, a few lucky clouds.

Wolves:

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He said his losses from the killed calves and the one injured April 30 — which he said likely won’t be marketable — amounts to an estimated \$4,000.

Birkmaier said he’s been working 20 hours a day for the previous eight or nine days to protect his cattle and use nonlethal methods to deter the wolves.

Ranchers also must remove all carcasses, bone piles and other attractants and be using non-lethal deterrents such as range riders to qualify for lethal take of wolves.

In this case, ODFW reports the livestock producer has a history of using non-lethal deterrents to haze wolves in the area, including flashing lights, radios and hiring a range rider with funding provided by a nonprofit organization.

“I’m trying all the nonlethal methods that I can,” Birkmaier said. “I’ve had a tremendous amount of help from the community.”

“The producer spent several nights in the pasture with his cattle following the first depredation and attempted to haze wolves out of the area on April 26 by shooting in the air over eight wolves he encountered in the pasture,” the agency stated. “Despite these efforts, wolves have continued to visit and have killed additional calves.”

Birkmaier said he’s received assistance from fellow ranchers and residents. In particular, he noted Mike and Mona Rahn, who have a cabin in the area.

“They dropped everything they were doing to help,” he said. “They were literally living with one group of cows.”

He said many others have helped who he will publicly thank at a later time.

“All ranchers work so hard during the calving season and we turn out healthy calves with lots of vigor,” Birkmaier said. “Before wolves were introduced, we didn’t have to worry about them much this time of year. Now it’s at a whole other level of loss, both emotional and financial and many extra hours of work. Ranchers don’t have that extra time ... and to have to work day and night to protect them from the wolves that are both nonnative and were introduced.”

The Chesnimus pack numbers at least eight or nine adult and yearling wolves, none of which have a working GPS collar, according to ODFW. The agency says killing two wolves would not be expected to impact the pack’s breeding success.

Roblyn Brown, wolf coordinator for ODFW,

said May 3 that Birkmaier’s April 30 calf losses were expected to be posted on the ODFW website May 3, after the investigation is complete.

She also said it’s possible the number of wolves allowed to be taken under the kill permits could increase.

“The potential to increase the number of wolves (permitted to kill) exists,” she said. “It just depends on if the number of depredations increases.”

ODFW released its annual wolf report on April 19, showing the state’s minimum wolf population remained virtually flat in 2021 while the number of wolf deaths was the most ever recorded in a single year.

The known population grew by two wolves, from 173 to 175, based on verified evidence and sightings. However, the agency says the actual number is likely higher.

Meanwhile, 26 wolves died in 2021, including 21 killed by humans, or about 12% of the population. Of those, four were hit by vehicles, eight were illegally poisoned, one was legally shot by a rancher on private property and another eight were killed by ODFW after repeatedly attacking livestock in Baker County.

“Despite this, we are confident in the continued health of the state’s wolf population as they expand in distribution across the state and show a strong upward population trend,” Brown said.

Environmental groups argued the report is evidence that wolves east of highways 395, 78 and 95 still require protections to aid in their recovery.

“State officials need to do more to combat the illegal killing of wolves, and they need to embrace non-lethal ways of preventing conflicts with livestock,” said Sophia Ressler, staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

John Williams, wolf committee co-chairman for the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said ranchers bear the economic and emotional brunt of wolves attacking their livestock.

In addition to confirmed depredations, Williams said the presence of wolves can make normally docile cows agitated, lowering birth rates and birth weight of calves that ultimately affects the producers’ bottom line.

“There has been a lot of conservation that has been done under the Oregon Wolf Conservation and Management Plan,” he said. “It’s time that a lot more management starts happening.”

— Reporter Bill Bradshaw of the Walla Walla County Chieftain contributed to this article.

Workers:

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“Two years ago we sat with approximately 100 jobs open,” she said. “In a survey done several months ago by the city, Pendleton was at 500 open positions. This is indicative of the overall theme across the state and nation.”

Rosenberg assessed the worker shortage is not necessarily easing thanks to wage hikes.

“There are so many factors facing folks today,” she said. “Higher wages are great, but without day care, housing, etc., higher wages don’t cover those struggles. I know one of the city’s priorities is housing, and Pendleton Children’s Center is working hard to create 150 slot daycare. We have some great providers in town, but reality is there’s just not enough to fill the gap.”

The lack of workers is a common theme.

Due to staff shortages, Starbucks in Southgate was closed on weekends last month according to a note on display on a window in early April.

A month later, the worker shortage seems to have improved somewhat, possibly helped by higher minimum wages. Now Starbucks is open on weekends, but still with reduced hours. The Saturday and Sunday hours shown on its website are 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., as opposed to 5:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. weekdays.

Oregon Grain Growers Brand Distillery co-owner Keili Bullington said staffing has been an issue for the establishment at 511 S.E. Court Ave., the same as it has been with many other industries.

“We have a few positions that we are currently looking

to hire and we look forward to seeing local faces coming back to work with us this summer after school is out,” she said.

McDonald’s raised its minimum wage to \$15 per hour in March. Burger King declined to comment, and Safeway’s director of communications and public affairs didn’t respond to questions.

U.S. inflation rose to its highest level since 1981 in March, as the Consumer Price Index spiked 8.4%, so cost increases eat into wage hikes.

Wildhorse Resort & Casino, with its subsidiary operations, was advertising at least 82 jobs in early April, ranging from unskilled, entry-level to highly trained professional positions. Among its satellite businesses requiring help were Arrowhead Truck Plaza by the freeway, the Hamley complex

downtown and Birch Creek Golf Course off Highway 395 south of Pendleton.

In early May, demand for workers remains high, with 80 positions listed, and CHI St. Anthony Hospital is advertising many available positions.

At the jobs fair, Tum-A-Lum Lumber Pendleton branch manager Shane Reinhardt said that just that morning his company had filled its last open position.

“We’re fully-staffed, but some other branches still need help,” he said.

During the pandemic, the U.S. labor force participation rate crashed from 63.4% in February 2020 to its coronavirus low of 60.2% in April, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. As schools and businesses closed, many parents again needed to care for children at home. By March, the rate had recovered to 62.4%.

Reaction:

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Maxwell emphasized that abortion is prohibited by the Didache, a text the Catholic Church holds sacred, and the church’s stance on abortion has not changed in hundreds of years.

“The Catholic Church has stood in opposition to abortion since the 15th century,” Maxwell continued. “It’s a mortal evil, you can’t change what’s true.”

John Herman, a member of the parish of Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church in La Grande, echoed that sentiment.

“They can call it whatever they want, but it’s still taking another person’s life,” he said.

Maxwell and his church parish are not alone. Anti-abortion protests are not uncommon in Eastern Oregon, and in fact it was a major concern Planned Parenthood addressed in a press conference May 3. Several questions revolved around security measures at the soon to be Ontario Clinic and how the organization

would address suspected protesters.

Officials gave assurances they have been diligently planning for this for a while, but refused to make an affirmative statement to the question.

Oregon’s senior U.S. senator, Ron Wyden, in a statement blasted the Republican Party and the draft.

“The Republican party has set the stage for a total erosion of Americans’ constitutional rights,” Wyden said. “They have made clear they won’t stop at gutting the right for a woman to make decisions about her own body. Republicans know that the majority of Americans don’t support eroding fundamental rights like privacy, so instead, they packed the Supreme Court with right-wing extremists willing to do their dirty work behind closed doors.”

Wyden said if this was a final draft, the United States will be one of a handful of countries moving backwards on women’s rights and mark a “devastating loss of constitutionally guaranteed bodily autonomy and privacy for more than half of America.”

He stated abortion is health care.

“Ending this protected and established right — a right generations of women have now known and that the overwhelming majority of Americans support — would harm the health, safety and lives of millions of women and families,” Wyden said. “This is going to be the fight of our lives, and we must use every tool at our disposal to stop this attack on constitutionally guaranteed rights.”

According to Politico, Chief Justice John Roberts confirmed the authenticity of the draft but stressed the document “does not represent a decision by the Court or the final position of any member on the issues in the case.”

Politico also noted, the draft opinion includes “a 31-page appendix of historical state abortion laws ... is replete with citations to previous court decisions, books and other authorities, and includes 118 footnotes.”

And the “appearances and timing of this draft,” according to Politico, “are consistent with court practice.”

— East Oregonian news editor Phil Wright and The Observer reporter Dick Mason contributed to this report.

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