

Pilot project uses dogs to sniff out little cherry disease

BY SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN

Capital Press
WENATCHEE, Wash. — “Cherry!”

At the command, Aspen, an Australian Shepherd, bounded along a row of boxes, sniffing each. Jan Flatten, the dog’s owner-trainer, ran behind, holding the leash.

Suddenly, Aspen stopped. After smelling a box, she sat by it and looked at Flatten.

“Yes! Good girl,” said Flatten. She gave Aspen a treat.

Aspen had just sniffed out, among a row of clean cherry branches, the one piece of wood infected with little cherry disease, which researchers call an “existential threat” to the industry.

Here at the Wenatchee Kennel Club in central Washington, volunteers are working with researchers, growers, detectives and USDA experts to train dogs sniff out little cherry disease.

For decades, people have trained dogs to detect explo-

sives, diseases, drugs and criminals. The new frontier for detection dogs, experts say, is agriculture.

Little cherry disease, caused by phytoplasma or one of two viruses, prompts trees to produce cherries that are small, pale and weak-flavored, making them unmarketable.

Growers typically can’t detect the disease until it’s too late — when the only solution is removing the infected tree to prevent the disease’s spread.

In a draft survey by Oregon State University and Washington State University, growers across the two states reported removing 974 acres of sweet cherries due to the disease between 2015 to 2020, \$115 million in lost revenue and costs. Because survey respondents manage only 26% of acreage across the region, experts estimate real losses are much higher.

“It’s unbelievable the number of cherry orchards ripped out. We’re at epidemic levels,”



Ashley Rodgers/Texas Tech University

The Wenatchee Kennel Club plans to bring in Nathan Hall, Texas Tech University assistant professor of companion animal science, for some third-party consulting, controlled trials and verification later this year.

said Teah Smith, agricultural consultant and entomologist at Zirkle Fruit Company.

Smith, along with Hannah Walter, orchard project lead at Stemilt Growers LLC, are providing the Wenatchee Kennel

Club with both clean and diseased cherry tree samples for trials.

The goal of this project is to train dogs to differentiate between clean and diseased wood and to detect the disease early,

when the trees are dormant or in the nursery before planting.

“They’re doing really well so far,” said Ines Hanrahan, executive director of the Washington Tree Fruit Research Commission. “Everything looks very promising.”

Lynda Pheasant, the pilot project’s leader at the kennel club, agreed.

“There’s no doubt now the dogs know what they’re doing,” she said.

Wenatchee Kennel Club is a volunteer-run organization founded in 1963. The club has about 150 members and offers 33 weekly classes in tracking, hunting, agility and scent work.

Six kennel club volunteers and their dogs were chosen for the pilot project. They come from a range of professional backgrounds, including the U.S. Forest Service, Housing Authority, USDA and CMI Orchards. Most are retired.

Their dogs represent a range of breeds. For the dogs, detection “work” is really play.

The dogs recently completed the first seven-week series and are now into their second course. The goal is to get the dogs in orchards by the end of 2021.

For this project, the Wenatchee Kennel Club has sought support from outside experts, including Hallie McMullen, an Idahoan who started training detection dogs for criminal justice work in 1995, and Nathan Hall of Texas Tech University, who recently won a \$475,000 USDA grant for his own detection dog research.

The project’s leaders say they envision a future where some people will become dog entrepreneurs, some farmers will train their own dogs and volunteers will offer community service.

Sue Edick, a volunteer, said she’s excited to serve the community with her dog, Cubby.

“It’s incredible what dogs can do,” she said. “It’s thrilling to witness.”

Vale officials see potential with short line railroad

BY PAT CALDWELL

Malheur Enterprise

VALE — When Vale Mayor Tom Vialpando looks at the rail lines that slice through town, he sees opportunity.

“There is no reason Vale can’t get a little bit of the share of the rail and possibilities of rail,” said Vialpando.

Vialpando said he wants to leverage several pieces of property near the rail line to spark economic development.

The tracks are part of a short line now owned by Jaguar, a transportation and logistics firm based in Joplin, Missouri.

Jaguar bought the short line from The Western Group last fall.

The short line used to run to Burns, but that stretch was abandoned in the early 1990s.

Now, the railroad operates about 25 miles of track between Ontario and EP Minerals west of Vale.

Vialpando said he is discussing with Snake River Economic Development Alliance and Jaguar the potential for property in Vale along the rail line.

Vialpando said last week he and Vale City Manager Todd Fuller, along with Kit Kamo and Kristen Nieskens from the development alliance, and Jaguar officials met in town recently to consider developments.

Doug Story, vice president of commercial development, is an eager partner in those ambitions.

“We are extremely interested in growing business along the



Pat Caldwell/Malheur Enterprise

Vale Mayor Tom Vialpando believes finding a way to link economic development to rail service will be key.

line and extremely interested in working with the city of Vale,” said Story.

Kamo said there are two sites in Vale that could be used for industry. Both are within the city urban growth boundary and have been identified by the state as suitable to rezone

for industry from their current designation for farming.

One property is a 117-acre chunk of land owned by Farmers Fresh Mushrooms, a Canadian company that once planned to build a facility on the site.

Those plans fell through in 2018 with no activity on the land.

A second industrial site, about 100 acres privately owned, is west of town along Graham Boulevard next to the rail line.

Vialpando said there are also a few small lots inside Vale that could be used for industrial development next to the rail line.

“There are two adjacent lots next to the American Legion. They are open and sit right next to the rail and would be

ideal for, say, loading docks,” said Vialpando.

The Farmers Fresh land is prime for development because it is “very close to sewer and water,” said Kamo.

The second piece of land on Graham Boulevard is not as close to city’s water and sewer hookup so would be “a little harder to develop,” said Kamo.

Both properties, though, are “very desirable,” said Kamo.

“They have access to a major highway and they also have rail access,” said Kamo.

Kamo said her agency receives numerous inquiries from companies that want rail transportation.

“We are working with a couple of different projects that require rail. That is true on both sides of the river. Most of those

projects want access to a short line because it is easier to get their product in and out,” said Kamo.

Kamo said there are also several businesses locally that want to expand and use rail.

Vialpando said he is “open to anything.”

Nieskens said the good news is Jaguar is “very motivated” to help economic development along its line.

The biggest challenge, she said, is finding the right fit for the property.

“When you talk about workforce and special needs of different projects, it is harder than you think,” said Nieskens.

Vialpando is optimistic about the city’s economic development future, he said. “Anything is possible.”

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