

Homegrown



FILE PHOTO

Watermelons roll by on a conveyer belt on a melon sizing machine at Pollock & Son's production facility outside of Hermiston.

Hermiston and watermelons: BRANDING AND HISTORY

By **SAM BARBEE**
Staff Writer

Wander through Hermiston and there's no doubt watermelon is king.

The water tower south of town is marked with the green and red fruit on its north side. Signs welcoming motorists to Hermiston greet them with it. It's on city letterhead, signs for private businesses and, come July, filling the entryways to grocery stores and fruit stands alike.

Even its seeds play a part in the long-running seed-spitting competition at the Umatilla County fair.

Why is the fruit such a large part of Hermiston's identity?

It's not economic. According to Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan, watermelon actually makes up a relatively small percentage of the area's annual production. Onions and potatoes, are were cultivated on 25,000 acres of land in Morrow and Umatilla Counties in 2013, are the lucrative crops. But watermelon has latched onto Hermiston, or vice versa, not because of economics, but because of its uniqueness.

"You're not going to be growing watermelons in Joseph or Burns," Morgan said. "We can grow watermelons better than anyone else. They're a good positive to be known for even if it isn't a direct economic impact in itself."

In terms of branding, watermelons are a good sell. They are attractive in hot Hermiston summers, and purchased and recognized widely.

"The first reaction everyone has (about Hermiston) is, 'Oh, watermelons,'" Morgan said. "The biggest thing to overcome in marketing is for people to understand and know in the first place ... Between mid-90s and 2012 one of big drivers for local jobs was burning off chemical weapons. You don't really



FILE PHOTO

Walchli Farms has used an inflatable giant watermelon on its float during the Umatilla County Fair Parade.

want to be known for that."

Part of it, Patrick Walchli of Walchli Farms explained, is that watermelons have been a mainstay of Hermiston farming for decades.

"There are other things here, there are other industries, but it's made its name over several years and people know who it is," he said. "Growing the crop has been passed down through generations. It's been a generational thing. You've grown up in it."

One reason the Columbia Basin is such a good area for growing anything, including watermelon, is the hot days and cold nights during growing

season. This creates the uniquely sweet watermelons that are shipped across North America. Walchli said most of his watermelons are distributed within the Northwest, but the Midwest has recently been a large buyer. They've also shipped to Texas and just about everywhere in Canada.

"I mean, if you go around the area and it's no different to me than saying, 'the Pendleton Round-up' and they instantly recognize it," Walchli said. "And Hermiston is recognized for the watermelons, which is a good deal for us melon growers because it shows we're doing our job."



FILE PHOTO

Field hands collect watermelons from a field owned by Bellinger Farms in 2015 outside of Hermiston.

Watermelons aren't easy to grow. They require specific conditions, both of the air and of the soil, and require much care and attention during its growth period, which lasts about 80 days. Once ready to harvest, the large fruits must then be gathered and stored, often by large crews working 80-hour weeks.

"It's labor-intensive," Walchli said. "It's a tough crop to grow. It takes a special kind of cat to want to get involved in a crop like watermelons."

Local farm wins radish seed dispute

Favorable decision may affect other growers in lawsuit with bank

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
EO Media Group

A favorable ruling won by a Hermiston farm in a legal dispute over radish seed may have positive consequences for other operations involved in the lawsuit.

Several farms in Oregon are fighting a legal complaint filed by Northwest Bank of Warren, Pa., that claims it has a security interest in radish seed they grew in 2014.

The bank claims the radish seed serves as collateral for a \$7 million loan taken out by Cover Crop Solutions, a seed company that contracted with Oregon growers to produce a proprietary variety.

Radish seed is used as a cover crop in the Midwest, but weather in 2014 reduced demand among farmers in that region and resulted in an oversupply.

Northwest Bank's lawsuit contends that its security interest in the radish seed has priority over that of the growers, but a federal judge in Portland has disagreed with that argu-

ment in regard to at least one farm.

U.S. Chief District Judge Michael Mosman has found that Hawman Farms of Hermiston agreed to grow roughly \$180,000 worth of seed and has a "possessory lien" on the crop that takes precedence over the security interest held by the bank.

Under a possessory lien, a party can retain possession of property until a debt has been paid.

Northwest Bank claimed the contract between Hawman Farms and Cover Crop Solutions invalidated all such liens, but Mosman decided that it only barred liens against the licensed radish cultivar — which was owned by another company — and not the physical seed crop.

Sanford Landress, attorney for Hawman Farms, said Mosman's opinion may also be consequential for other farms, which claim they have possessory liens on the seed.

Hawman Farms grew, cleaned and stored the radish seed, which puts the company in a different legal position than growers who had another firm clean and store the crop, Landress said.

"People with continuous possession of the seed, like Hawman, are going to beat the bank," he said.

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