

FRUIT

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“Right now they’re not ripe, but I expect to have good quality from what we’ve seen,” he said.

He said in Eastern Oregon you never know what you’re going to get, weather-wise, during a growing season.

The region’s climate is one of the reasons Hermiston watermelons are so sweet, however. Hot days spur the plants to produce more sugar for energy, and cool nights help them retain the sugar. The taste makes the melons a coveted commodity around the United States, and draws people to Hermiston each year.

In August, Portland residents will get to taste the fruit that put Hermiston on the map during the city’s annual watermelon giveaway.

The event in Portland’s Pioneer Square at noon on Aug. 2 will include free water-

melons and other fresh Hermiston-grown produce, plus a seed-spitting contest between Hermiston and Portland officials.

It is sponsored by the city of Hermiston, the city of Portland and the Greater Hermiston Area Chamber of Commerce, with produce donated by Botsford and Goodfellow, Pollock and Sons, Bellinger Farms, Walchli Farms and Walchli Organic.

The annual giveaway began in the 1980s when then-mayor Frank Harknider loaded up a pickup truck with watermelons and challenged Bud Clark, then Portland’s mayor, to a seed spitting contest. After a hiatus in 2007 it was restarted in 2015 as a way for Hermiston and Portland officials to network and discuss issues facing both communities.

“This is a great event that continues to build on our relationship with our partners in Portland,” Mayor Dave Drotzmann said in a statement.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Bobby Bellinger rings up watermelons and other farm produce at the Bellinger Farms store on Highway 395 in Hermiston.

STEM

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The camp was brought to Oregon with the help of Community and Shelter Assistance of Oregon, which received a NeighborWorks grant. The grant was able to fund about half of the spots for the camp, and Skyhawks took care of the rest.

“We thought children with the most need were already located by Made to Thrive,” said Monica Cervantes of the Oregon Child Development Coalition, who is part of CASA of Oregon.

More than 15 different businesses and organizations donated to the effort, including the Hermiston School District, which offered Sandstone Middle School as a place to host the camp. Sullivan said the district also offered free breakfast and lunch to children in the area at the school.

Made to Thrive currently serves 267 children in Hermiston, and organizers of Skyhawks STEM Sports Camp are hoping to reach more of them every year.

“We’d like to be able to do this on an annual basis



Staff photo by Jessica Pollard
Campers settle down outside Sandstone Middle School.

so we can track if we get the same kids year after year, and to be able to find a way to measure the impact

that it has,” said Teresa Best of New Hope Community Church, who is also part of CASA.

Dammeyer said the coaches at camp were starting to learn more about the lives of the kids participat-

ing. She said some are facing poverty, foster care, and incarcerated parents. “This is bringing tears

to my eyes, these kids have been labeled so many different things,” Dammeyer said. “We’re proving a lot of people wrong right now.”

With a ratio of four coaches to 48 kids, she hopes next year they will be able to up the staff.

Last Wednesday was a particularly notable day at Skyhawks STEM Sports Camp, because the children received gifts from community partners, including ice cream courtesy of Helados La Michoacana in Hermiston. At the end of the camp this week, all children received a soccer ball courtesy of Skyhawks.

As kids filed into the gym, their camp T-shirts were still crisp white, but Dammeyer said they wouldn’t be for long.

“It’s just really special,” she said of the camp.

Many of the children who went to Skyhawk STEM Sports Camp last week are attending Ambassadors Soccer Camp, sponsored by New Hope Community Church, this week.

“It wrapped up very well,” Dammeyer said. “The kids went home really excited.”

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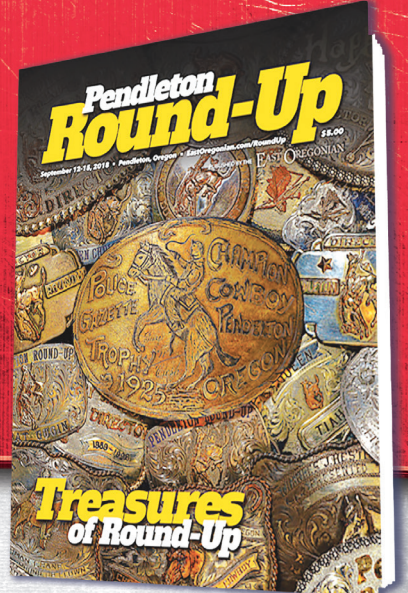
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