

POSTED: Thursday, Dec. 10, 2009

## 2009 was a good year for local growers, challenge for dairy farmers

DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

When it comes to Whatcom County agriculture, 2009 was good for growing but bad for milking.

For local farmers who grew things, many benefited from well-timed good weather to produce high-quality and high-quantity harvests. For dairy farmers, it was an extremely difficult year as man-made factors - particularly prices - created a situation where producing milk was a money-losing proposition.

"The biggest problem in dairy has been the wild price fluctuations," said Cheryl DeHaan, who owns a dairy farm in the north part of the county and is the community education program manager at Whatcom Farm Friends. "This year, the lows have stuck around longer, hurting even the longtime dairy farms."



ANDY BRONSON | THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Unlike dairy farmers, some of the growers who harvested large crops also got a good price. Averaging out all types of grades, local raspberry growers received about \$1 a pound this year, which is considered a good price compared to previous years.

This price was for a harvest of 58.5 million pounds, the second-highest yield ever in Whatcom County. For those growers, it's meant a chance to reinvest as well as make up for the lean years, when raspberry prices had fallen to the 50-cent range for wholesale processed raspberries.

Other crops may not have gotten as good a price, but it was still a good year. John Belisle of Bellewood Acres said Whatcom County saw good weather for growing good quality apples, but so did many other parts of the country, leading to an oversupply of apples and a drop in prices. That also happened with blueberries, a crop that has been increasing locally in recent years.

"While we didn't get the best prices, we did see an increase in people visiting our farm this year," Belisle said. "It was still a fun year and the customers that stopped by were great."

After a wild winter, spring and summer were relatively mild, creating few problems. During the summer there was only a single one-week stretch of really hot weather, and there was no freak hail or wind to damage crops when the fruits and vegetables were ripening.

"It really set us up for a nice fall season," Belisle said.

#### LOW PRICES HURT DAIRY FARMERS

At different points in 2009 the price was hovering around \$10 per 100 pounds of liquid milk. For most dairy farms, they need the price to be around \$16 to break even, DeHaan said. Just two years ago, Washington dairy farmers were getting \$22.30.

Other economic factors have played a role in hurting the dairy farmer. Prior to the financial meltdown last year, there was the steep rise in oil prices, which led to a spike in the price of commodities farmers use to run a dairy. This drained the equity of dairy farmers normally saving for the lean times. After the meltdown put a hurt on financial institutions, it became difficult to get loans from banks, DeHaan said.

The result has been the disappearance of local dairy farms. Official numbers aren't out yet, but DeHaan expects Whatcom County to be hovering around 100 dairy farms at the end of the year. That would be down from 167 farms in 2005 and 208 in 2002.

Sherman Polinder, a longtime county dairy farmer, said it's the worst downturn he's seen since he started in 1963 and probably since the Great Depression.

"I'm not complaining, because I've been blessed with more than 40 good years in farming, but it is a very tough patch right now," Polinder said.

While it's been a difficult year for prices, it may be turning around for the industry. Prices have been rising recently, so there is some hope that 2010 could be a year to help recover. The nice weather that benefited growers also helped dairy farmers: It was one of the better years for growing grass to make hay, and feed prices have remained low.

"As a farmer, you learn to accept the fluctuations and the things you can't control," DeHaan said. "It's still a very good way of life."

Reach DAVE GALLAGHER at [dave.gallagher@bellinghamherald.com](mailto:dave.gallagher@bellinghamherald.com) or call 715-2269.