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Whatcom County farmers put dismal 2010 harvest behind them

DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

A wet, cold spring and summer combined with the arrival of a pesky fly led to a somewhat disappointing harvest for many Whatcom County farmers, but they are now turning their attention to the upcoming winter.

Last week the Washington Red Raspberry Commission released its estimated production totals for 2010, and at first blush the numbers don't look too bad: Whatcom County farmers harvested 53.7 million pounds of the berry, down just 8.7 percent from the record-breaking year of 2009. This year was the sixth-highest total in the past 10 years.

However, this year's decrease was softened by the expansion of the raspberry crop by several hundred acres. If one were to measure this year's crop with the same acres as last year, the production was off by 10 to 15 percent, said Henry Bierlink, executive director of the commission and Whatcom Farm Friends.



The cold spring weather created some problems with the bee pollination process, leading to a smaller yield for a variety of berries. At Boxx Berry Farm, a u-pick farm on Northwest Drive, there were periods this summer when u-picking of raspberries and blueberries was halted because the yield wasn't strong enough.

"We had a strong year in terms of public demand, but it was a very odd year when it came to growing (fruits and vegetables)," Mike Boxx said. "It's one of those years you just put behind you and move on."

While the weather impacted the yield, the quality of raspberries was decent this year, according to Bierlink. The first part of the harvest season in July was a challenge because the weather was still wet and cool, but as the sun came out and temperatures rose later in the month, the berry

quality improved. This year's price for the different grades of raspberries ranged from average to mediocre, he said.

"For some farmers, it was enough to pay the bills," Bierlink said.

The local blueberry crop was also impacted by the weather. Official numbers are not available yet, but it is estimated Washington state harvested 42 million pounds in 2010, with about 17 million pounds coming from Whatcom County, said Alan Schreiber, director of the Washington Blueberry Commission. If Whatcom's forecasted total holds, the harvest would be down slightly from last year, Schreiber said.

Whatcom's blueberry crop is currently the largest in the state, followed by Skagit County and then Eastern Washington. However, Eastern Washington has had a significant increase in new plantings in the past few years, which should boost its overall yield.

Prices for the blueberries were not as good as a few years ago, but still relatively good, Schreiber said. There's been an increase in consumer demand for blueberries, so the amount in storage in Washington is down about 20 percent from last year. That may bode well for blueberry prices for farmers next season, he said.

A few crops appear to have had a decent harvest season despite the weather. Derek Gavette, co-owner of Stoney Ridge Farm near Everson, said it's been a great fall on his farm for apples and pumpkins. They've also had the good fortune of being open on clear, crisp fall days, boosting visitor totals. He estimates the number of people who have visited Stoney Ridge this fall is up 20 percent compared to last year.

"The flavor of the apples has been very good this year, making it a super season for us," Gavette said. After this weekend Stoney Ridge will close for a month, re-opening the Friday after Thanksgiving to start selling Christmas trees and other holiday products.

ASIAN INSECTS HIT WHATCOM BERRIES

Whatcom County berry farmers spent much of this year on the lookout for the spotted wing drosophila, also known as the red-eyed vinegar fly. It made an appearance in Whatcom County at the end of the raspberry harvest and during the blueberry harvest. The fly landed on the West Coast from Asia in 2008 and has been making its way northward from California, attacking ripening and rotting berry fruit.

"It (the fly) is very tiny, making it hard to spot," Boxx said. "But we know it's here and we'll be planning to deal with it next year."

According to the Washington State University extension center, the fly is still showing up in traps in Eastern Washington. Bierlink isn't sure whether the fly will remain the area over the winter and attack berries next season, but research will continue during the winter.

With the blueberry crop, the drosophila didn't have a huge impact on the yield, but it did add significantly to the cost of production as farmers tried to control it, Schreiber said. He added that research about the fly and getting the information out to farmers is a top priority for the blueberry commission this winter.

Despite the fly issue, Bierlink expects to see an increase in the number of Whatcom County acres devoted to raspberries. With a cold winter predicted this year, Bierlink said the critical periods will be the early and late parts of the season. Whatcom County farmers don't want to see deep frosts early in the winter, and they also hope the transition from winter to spring is gradual.

"Berries usually don't mind the harsh winter in the middle," Bierlink said. "So far (this fall), the weather has been very good."

WHATCOM COUNTY RASPBERRY PRODUCTION<.strong>

The amount of raspberries harvest in Whatcom County in the past 10 years:

2010: 53.7 million pounds

2009: 58.9 million pounds

2008: 48.2 million pounds

2007: 47.8 million pounds

2006: 49.2 million pounds

2005: 58.7 million pounds

2004: 45.9 million pounds

2003: 54.5 million pounds

2002: 58.4 million pounds

2001: 57.5 million pounds

SOURCE: Washington Red Raspberry Commission

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Read more: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2010/10/31/1693235/whatcom-county-farmers-put-disappointing.html#ixzz149fc3A6D>