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Crops & Markets

Northwest cherry producers primed for bigger things to come

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Tom Karst

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WENATCHEE, Wash. — This likely won't be the year, but Northwest cherry growers are primed to produce record crops of cherries in coming years.

Fresh shipments close to 25 million boxes may be just around the corner, marketers said, as recently planted cherry trees mature. The current shipment record was just more than 20 million boxes, recorded in 2009.

A 2007 survey of cherry fruit acreage in Washington found 33,633 acres of bearing orchards and 5,179 acres of non-bearing trees. Total Washington cherry acreage in 2007 — the latest survey available — shows 38,811 acres of cherries, up from 34,835 acres in 2002 and 22,938 acres in 1997.

Northwest fruit growers had gone through a period from 1997 to 2005 when apples had been overplanted and so many growers turned their attention to cherries, said Desmond O'Rourke, president of Belrose Inc., Pullman.

There may be enough cherry trees in the ground right now to produce a 25-million or 26-million-box crop, said Roger Pepperl, marketing director for Wenatchee-based Stemilt Growers Inc.

Still, O'Rourke said all apple growers aren't excited about cherries, relative to their short season and the work required for the orchard and harvest.

"A lot of apple growers don't want to bother with it," O'Rourke said.

Cherry marketers will face challenges as production expands.

The industry has a big variety of dark sweet cherries, but O'Rourke said the industry doesn't have a clear idea how the various varieties within the category stack up against each other.

A 25-million-box crop will help expand consumer use of cherries, said Mac Riggan, vice president of marketing for Chelan Fresh Marketing, Chelan.

Instead of the 30% market penetration the cherry market had last year, a bin-busting crop would boost domestic consumer penetration to perhaps 50% to 60%, Riggan said.

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In March, 2010 there were 16 companies cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for violations of the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act. In March, 2011 the number of companies barred from operating dropped to 10, a slight improvement over last year.



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