

Huge Orchards Increase Apple Crops

By The New York Times

ROYAL CITY, Wash. — Washington is harvesting what is likely to be the state's largest apple crop, using advanced technology and economies of scale that may make the family-run orchard a thing of the past here as well as in other apple-growing regions in New York and Michigan.

The Columbia River Basin, in the relatively isolated central part of the state, is being converted from wheat and row-crop agriculture to more lucrative crops like apples by corporate farmers that are reaping increased profits from huge orchards.

Dozens of young orchards 250 acres and larger have been planted by large fruit packers since the early 1990's. In some areas of the basin, orchards have been planted 1,000 acres at a time. Apples, especially the premier Red Delicious, thrive here because of the dry pest-free climate, rich volcanic soils and abundant water from the Grand Coulee Dam.

Washington already produces more than half of the nation's apples. The United States Apple Association estimates that the state will produce 94 million 42-pound boxes of freshly packed apples in the current harvest, which runs from late August to early November. In 1994, the state produced 92 million boxes. New York, the No. 2 apple state, is expected to produce 28 million boxes.

"Efficiency is the key," said Karen Maib, an extension agent, who is the local adviser to tree-fruit growers and who works for Washington State University. "It comes through good management and economies of scale."

Orchards make up 50,000 acres of the basin, Ms. Maib said. Nearly all the orchards are planted to the latest Red Delicious strains or to varieties like Fuji, Braeburn and Gala.

Corporate farms threaten family farms.

Experts say it is difficult to gauge how much fruit is produced; because nearly all of it is sent to other regions for packing or processing. About half the 350 orchards in the north basin have absentee owners. Orchards stretch across the rolling desert landscape in long rows of small uniform trees, many grown on wire trellises. Within a few years of planting, the orchards can yield more than mature orchards elsewhere.

Absentee corporate owners send in migrant crews from the West and Mexico to train, thin, pick and prune the trees with assembly-line efficiency. The new orchards are in stark contrast to the generations-old 40-acre family-owned orchards that prevail in other regions of the state and the nation.

The sweet aroma of fresh apples smashed beneath the fat wheels of a tractor still blend with the foul smell of diesel at harvest time. But much else has changed. The new orchards are rarely run by an owner-operator in pinstriped overalls who may serve on the local school board. Instead, they are controlled by a board of directors, firms of lawyers and accountants, corporate managers and field agents.

"Average isn't good enough," said Brooke Peterson, a former banker and extension agent who oversees several large orchards here. He defines an average grower as one who is going broke.

A good grower, Mr. Peterson said, can produce 50 to 60 bins an acre,

well above the state average of 35 bins an acre. Each bin has about 1,000 pounds of apples.

"If he can't do that," he added, "he's in trouble. We're competing against ourselves and our neighbors. Anybody in Washington can beat out everybody in New York or Michigan. That's almost a given. People in this state have a bullish attitude."

Decisions are made with the help of computers, satellite dishes and Internet communications that connect shippers with global markets.

Field agents like Mr. Peterson live in their pickup trucks at harvest time, which continues into November with new late varieties like the Fuji. Washington is expected to produce more than five million boxes of that sweet dessert apple this year. Just a few years ago the state had none.

Even third-generation growers like Todd Cowan have rushed to plant factory-style orchards. Mr. Cowan said he could grow apples at a cost of \$2.25 a box, compared with \$4 to \$5 a box in the old orchard that surrounds his home 70 miles away.

Blue Bird, the cooperative that Mr. Peterson works for and that Mr. Cowan owns with 300 other people, is one of the many small players in the basin, compared with giants like Stemilt Growers, Dovex, Zirkle Fruit, Borton and Sons, Washington Fruit and Produce and the Evans Fruit Company, all of which have thousands of newly planted acres.

The orchards are beginning to produce their crops. The effects that they will have on small family orchards in other regions will become clear in a few years.

"There isn't an apple-growing region in the world that isn't affected by how things are done here," Ms. Maib said. "This is a showplace for a lot of people. They come here to see how it's done."