

Dole leaving Northwest

By RICK STEIGMEYER
For the Capital Press

EAST WENATCHEE, Wash. — Dole Northwest will close the doors of its East Wenatchee and Chelan fruit packing operations as soon as last year's crop is packed, company spokesmen said June 19.

The company announced that it was shutting down its Northwest tree fruit operations and California deciduous businesses in an attempt to boost profits for its shareholders, said Al Bates, Dole's vice president for North American fruit operations.

"We will be packing fruit currently in storage, but will not be accepting fruit from this year's crop," Bates said from Dole's Bakersfield, Calif., offices. Local employees were instructed not to talk to media and were not available for comment.

The move will put more than 100 employees out of work at packinghouses in East Wenatchee and Chelan. More than 100 growers who previously brought fruit to Dole's two packinghouses will have to find other outlets, Bates said.

The company is developing a plan on how to market its assets, he said. The two warehouses and about 1,000 acres of orchards likely will be sold. Fruit from company orchards will be packed by other warehouses. The packing plants handled about 3 million boxes of apples and pears from last year's crop.

Reason for the pullout is simply a matter of economics, Bates said.

"We haven't had good returns and we see market conditions continuing to decline. It's just a business decision. We made a decision a year and a half ago to target those parts of our business away from our core that haven't shown a profit," he said. In addition to Washington tree fruit operations, Dole plans to shut down its California tree fruit and tablegrape operations, he said.

Dole Northwest purchased Wells and Wade Fruit Co., based in Wenatchee, and Beebe Fruit Co. in Chelan in 1989 with plans to add profitable apples and other tree fruit to its line of in-