

Cherry crop loss estimate as high as 40 percent

BY MARCO MARTINEZ AND DAN WHEAT
World staff writers

WENATCHEE — The rain has gone, but a dark cloud still hangs over the cherry industry with Wednesday's storm wiping out 25 percent to 40 percent of the crop.

Most of the damage took place in the lower Wenatchee Valley areas, where much of the cherry crop was ready for picking, said Jeff Heath, a fieldman for Stemilt Growers of Wenatchee. He said the damage wasn't as bad in areas where cherries are a couple of weeks away from being harvested.



World photo/Tom Williams

Cherry grower Brandon Lewis inspects his Wenatchee orchard Thursday afternoon.

"It's an orchard-by-orchard situation rather than a

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regional picture," he said. "Some growers were luckier than others."

Wednesday's storm, which lasted most of the day, dropped .53 inches of rain on the region, according to the National Weather Service.

A letter 4th District Congressman Richard "Doc" Hastings sent Thursday to U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman put the crop loss estimate at 40 percent.

"The cherry crop has been the bright shining star of the tree fruit industry the last three or four years," Heath said. "It's been making growers money. When you have a disaster like this, it reduces the chances of profitability for a lot of guys. A lot of growers are diversified so they can spread the risk.

"To take a hit on what's been making you money really hurts."

Mike Wade, general manager at Columbia Fruit Packers, said he's heard a wide variety of losses from individual growers — some as low as 10 percent and others as high as 70 percent.

"Those growers with a 60 or 70 percent split can't logistically get in there and get their pickers to clean it up so the warehouse can do something with it," Wade said. "They're having to walk away from their crop, which is a very tough thing to do for any grower."

Heath said the biggest and ripest fruit suffered the most damage.

"Fruit that was less mature split less," he said. "The thing that hurt

the most was the length of the rainstorm. "The longer cherries are wet, the more prone they are to splitting," he said.

Wade said some cherries that are 10 days to two weeks away from picking didn't go unscathed. He said while rain caused some splitting among the later cherries, they will likely shrivel up over the next few days, which will make it easier for processing.

"Those cherries could be mechanically removed during the sorting system," he said. "That makes a huge difference as opposed to the cost of having to hand-sort those cherries out."

Eric Patrick, promotions director for Northwest Cherry Growers, a Yakima-based division of the Washington State Fruit Commission, said the organization is predicting 30 percent of the overall Northwest cherry crop was lost in Wednesday's Washington storm and lighter rain in Oregon.

"If you divide our season into thirds, the first third was wonderful, the second third took a pretty big hit and the third part of the season, the later district cherries, everyone I've talked to seems to think they came out OK," Patrick said. "Weather permitting, that will be a good crop."

He said rain damage was heavy in some areas. He said the key now is communication among growers, shippers and retailers so retailers know the tonnage and timing of what's available.

Brandon Lewis, who operates orchards on North Western Avenue and at Springwater and Woodward, said he had a crew

trying to sort culls at 6:30 a.m. Thursday but soon knew he was done. He estimated 75 percent of his Bing crop was destroyed. He said his Lamberts are questionable. He said he may pick a few Rainiers.

He said he had wind machines going Wednesday and made three trips through his orchard with his speed sprayer blowing off cherries only to watch rain fall again as soon as he got done.

"It's pretty frustrating," he said. "This was the best

crop I've had in seven years and I won't get to pick them. We were going to start Monday but waited for ideal color. We were going to start Wednesday and didn't even get to pick a cherry."

With low apple prices, Lewis said, he was counting on cherry income to pay bills. He said he doesn't know if he can make it financially and hopes he can get an advance from his warehouse, Stemilt Growers, to harvest his pears and apples.

He said he has no crop insurance on cherries and had three years, prior to last year, without rain damage.

Lewis said he let his pickers go. "They just said it made them sick and they are ready to go back



World photo/Tom Williams

These Lambert cherries were part of a Wenatchee orchard hit hard by Wednesday's rainstorm.

to California," he said.

"A lot of these guys are done thinning. Now, they are without jobs. It's hurting them, too."