

GROWERS/Crop Good

Continued from Page 1A

in lower than last year's 228 million boxes, but the estimated amount released this week is a significant decline, said Miles Kohl, manager of the Yakima Valley Growers-Shippers Association.

The drop indicates growers nationwide are addressing the issue of oversupply by yanking out orchards. And new plantings favor popular consumers choices such as Fujis and Galas.

The reduced national crop means Washington apples will likely appear sooner in East Coast stores, said Keith Mathews, director of marketing for Rainier Fruit Co. in Selah.

"Washington's crop is still relatively good while the rest of the country's is depleted," Mathews said. "This should give us much quicker and deeper access to the East Coast market."

But there are a few challenges, he added.

Retailers tend to favor fruit in particular sizes, typically 72 to 80 apples per 42 pound box.

But the typical fruit size this year is expected to be around 100 apples per 42 pound box.

"We're working on that, convincing a fair number of retailers to drop a size," Mathews said. "But as an industry as whole, we should be able to do that."

Marketers also face an unresolved 47 percent Mexican tariff on Red and Golden Delicious apples.

If the tariff dispute drags on into January, when Red and Golden shipments to Mexico begin in earnest, state marketing officials have said they'll try to increase sales of Galas, Fujis and Granny Smiths to

Mexico and to open new markets for Reds and Goldens.

One grower hopeful about rising prices is Don Weippert, who has apple, pear and cherry orchards in the Yakima Valley.

He and others expected prices to hold this year or climb slightly with the state's estimate. But the light national crop means decreased supply everywhere, and that bodes even better for prices, Weippert said.

Also, since most apples will be smaller in size, those with large fruit will "receive a horrendous premium, and even for the smaller fruit, prices will be significantly better," he said.

As a fresh pear grower, he's also hoping that a smaller pear crop brings higher returns for that fruit.

The fresh pear crop is estimated at 2.8 million boxes for Washington and Oregon, down from 2.9 million last year. A box of pears weighs 44 pounds.

Most Yakima Valley pear growers produce for the processed market, but some, including Weippert, also pack for the fresh market.

Pear harvest began in earnest last week and generally lasts through September. As of Monday, fresh Bartletts averaged \$17.78 a box, up from \$16.25 last year and \$15.11 two years ago, according to the Clearing House.

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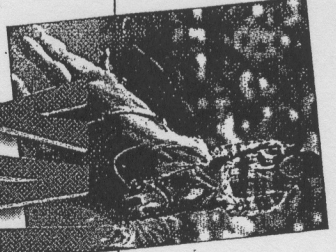
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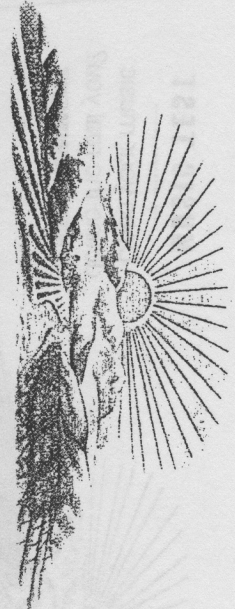
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