

LOCAL

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Pear-tree plantings increase

It's a comeback for the fruit after Naumes Inc. reduced orchard acreage just a few years ago

By GREG STILES

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Pear markets have rebounded in a modest way — enough to create something of an odd sight in the Rogue Valley these days: the planting of a new pear orchard.

"People are really looking more favorably on pears at this time," Naumes Inc. President Mike Naumes said.

Three years ago, foreign competition and rising land values led Naumes Inc. to reduce orchard acreage, pursue mining interests in California and sell orchard land in Washington.

Naumes crews are now planting 7,500 pear trees on a 60-acre site off of South Stage Road between Voorhies Road and Kings Highway, with another 2,500 to follow.

"We have around 5,000 producing acres now," Vice President Laura Naumes said. "It used to be between 7,000 and 8,000 acres, but we're more interested in being profitable than how big we are."

Even as Naumes Inc. removed orchard blocks within Jackson County's 50-year growth plan areas along Foothill Road and Kings Highway earlier this decade, the company added pear trees at the old Eden Valley Ranch off Carpenter Hill Road and other areas.

"We've sold some acreage, but if our acreage gets too low, it gets problematic," Mike Naumes said. "We planted 25 acres of Comice and within the last three years 25 to 30 acres of Bosc and Taylor Gold pears."

Growing fruit remains important if for no other reason than Naumes' 34,548-square-foot Melrose packing house and neighboring cold storage unit on Fir Street.

"Everything is worth what you can do with it from an operational standpoint," Mike Naumes said. "A fruit-packing house isn't worth a lot of money if you don't have fruit to run through it."

Naumes Inc., once the largest independent apple and pear grower in the U.S. with holdings in California, Oregon and Washington, has shifted to a primary mix of pears and cherries in recent years.

While removing apple orchards in California and Oregon, it is actively increasing cherry acreage in the Sacramento Valley.

"The key thing is that we're trying to maintain an overall economic unit," Mike Naumes said. "It's a balancing act and that's what we're working toward — maintaining that good balance."

Fresh market growers here and throughout the West have been caught in the wringer of production, foreign competition and increasing land values.

Naumes Inc. orchards in Central Washington have given way to houses. Construction is due to start in a few months on a Wal-Mart where Naumes trees once stood near Chelan.

Naumes Inc. has supply agreements with major outlets such as Costco, but that's no long-term guarantee.

"Retailers don't understand agriculture and really don't care," Laura Naumes said. "It's strictly business. So putting in new orchards is a gamble to some degree."

She says major retailers try to support U.S. produce to a point.

"If imports are cheaper they can make better margins," Laura Naumes said. "Right now there is an overlap, they're starting to send fruit out in the Southern Hemisphere, and we're finishing up."

When there are bumper crops in both hemispheres, that creates its own problems. Chile dropped a lot of fruit into North America earlier in the decade but has since removed some of its orchards and entered other markets.

"I don't look at them as a threat any more," Mike Naumes said. "Argentina comes into our market somewhat later than Chile and with different varieties."

China looms as a threat, but so far just in Asian varieties.

"Because of global competition, you have to do everything well," Laura Naumes said. "You have to grow it well, pack it well and have a good sales team marketing it."

Golden Bosc, Star Crimson and French Butter are among the varieties going in on land that is part of 500 contiguous acres owned by the company.

"The golden Bosc has marketplace appeal," Laura Naumes said, while the Star Crimson variety will boost early-season harvest numbers. Naumes Inc. grows French Butter on its Sacramento Valley holdings.

"This will allow us to extend the growing season for that variety into the middle of the fall," she said, noting the Rogue Valley's harvest cycle trails California by about a month.

The roughly \$150,000 project on South Stage Road is on a patch of ground purchased from Rogue River Orchards Co. a generation ago. With irrigation systems already in place, the project was financially feasible.

The property was a Granny Smith apple orchard from the 1980s until two years ago when the trees were pulled out.

Naumes Inc. has 2,100 acres in fruit production in California and is increasing its cherry orchards. It has 1,600 acres in pear production here and another 750 in Washington's Yakima Valley. Naumes moved into Washington in 1981 and at its peak had 1,058 acres — primarily apples, with some pears and cherries — in production.

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