

Crop Management

Market growth tops Oregon tree growers' Christmas wish list

By T.J. BURNHAM

PUMPKIN producers have sweetened Halloween's high sales by canning pumpkins for pie usage throughout the year. Similarly, the turkey industry has successfully heated up its markets well beyond Thanksgiving. Yet, Christmas trees remain locked into a single holiday when growers make it or break it.

For Oregon, the nation's foremost vendor of yule trees, December hits with the finality of ax against evergreen.

Last year's sales — traditionally ranked about fifth among Oregon crops — struck a \$108 million total. While that fell \$5.6 million below the previous National Agricultural Statistics Service report for 2003, it marked a sharp rise of \$9.7 million over 2001.

The outlook in new plantings and 2006-07 sales pressure looks staggering. Expected tree sales for the two years and historic planting data from NASS surveys show that in the upcoming two to three years, the number of trees that

Key Points

- Oregon growers sold \$108 million in Christmas trees in 2005.
- Average price for a single tree in 2005 was \$15.62, down from 2003's \$17.06
- Douglas fir remains the top consumer choice.

will be available for harvest will exceed the present sales level of nearly 7 million trees, by as much as 3 million a year.

"This points to the increasing importance of market analysis, promotion and sales efforts in the future to expand the Christmas tree market," NASS notes in its "Oregon Christmas Trees 2005" report compiled from summer surveys.

"Indicated plantings for 2005 at 8.3 million and 2006 at 7.6 million seedlings show that growers are adjusting their plantings downward," NASS reports.

It is a harder adjustment than most farmers face, since it takes seven years to get a market-sized Douglas fir tree, which shares with Noble fir the top po-



sition in consumer preference. Douglas firs account for more than half of the trees sold, and more than 35% of the total Oregon yule tree sales value.

Unknown markets

With no way to tell what the market will be for a tree in seven years, adjustments in the industry are normally difficult. Plantings set a record in 2001 with 10.5 million trees for the Christmas market produced in Oregon. Plantings of Douglas fir have been down since 2003, but Noble fir plantings only began to decline over the past two years. It took until this year for plantings of Nordmann to decrease for the first time.

Much depends on success in the

Oregon yule tree market, with more than 9,500 full- and part-time workers involved in the industry each year pruning, treating, cutting and shipping product. Wages hit the \$32 million mark in 2005 when almost 7 million trees were marketed, mostly to California where 47% were delivered. Only 8% of the trees were sold in Oregon.

Average prices for an Oregon Christmas tree last year was down at \$15.62 per tree, a decline from 2003's \$17.06. Growers with more than 100 acres did 80% of the business.

Oregon, which grows nearly 63,000 acres of Christmas trees, plants mostly in Clackamas, Marion, Benton and Polk counties.



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