Crop Management

TREE TITAN: Joe Sharp, Yule Tree Farms president, Canby, Ore., co-founded the Coalition of Environmentally-Conscious Growers to dispel myths about artificial trees.

Coalition provides new voice for ag

By **T.J. BURNHAM**

A NEW Oregon producer organization, the Coalition of Environmentally-Conscious Growers, warns that artificial Christmas trees imported from China may contain dangerous lead levels. It's better, argue two Oregon tree producers, to buy the real thing.

Joe Sharp of Yule Tree Farms and Greg Rondeau of Holiday Farms say a certificate from the coalition can guarantee if a tree was grown using environmentally friendly methods.

"Artificial trees are a bigger problem today because some may contain chemicals which are not good for the environment," says Jaclyn Ngai, public relations spokeswoman for the coalition. Some may contain PVCs, lead and insects that make their way into the U.S., she notes.

"Most of our efforts right now are in education of the public about this issue," she says.

While the coalition has only the two Oregon Christmas tree growers as members, Ngai says the plan is to make it into a national unit representing various crops. "We have requests for membership applications from other growers not in Oregon, but who produce Christmas trees," she says.

Rondeau, sales manager at Holiday Farms near Corvallis, says his company helped found the coalition "to get the truth out about real and fake trees."

People buying artificial trees, thinking they are aiding the environment, "are 180 degrees off the mark," Rondeau says. "Artificial trees end up going to the dump, where they last forever."

Real Christmas trees, on the other hand, "are the real choice for the environment," he adds. "An acre of real trees gives off enough oxygen to supply 18 people each day. They provide animal habitats and help preserve the land."

Environmentally certified producers in the coalition work to prevent erosion (many use cover crops), rotate their crops to preserve soil health, and provide a recyclable product, he explains.

One mission of the coalition is to dispel Christmas tree myths, Rondeau adds. "Many feel these trees come from forests which are left bare after we harvest," he says. "Our trees are regular farm crops.

"Some people also believe Christmas trees are cut from the tops of large trees in the forest," he adds. "That is simply not the case."

Sharp, president of Yule Tree Farms near Canby and a coaltion co-founder, says his industry has "struggled with the misconception that artificial trees are better for the environment for 15 years."

For more information on the coalition, call Ngai at 201-843-5600.

Reach expanding

AS he sees more concern among consumers about how farmers are caring for the environment, Oregon Christmas tree producer Joe Sharp wants to strengthen agriculture's public relations voice.

"As we see more concern among consumers about what is going on with the environment, such as global warming, I am afraid agriculture hasn't taken credit for what it does to preserve the land, air and water quality; protect habitat; and much more," says the president of Yule Tree Farms near Canby.

He is promoting membership in the Coalition of Environmentally-Conscious Growers to spread the good news about the industry.

"We have new members already signing up," he says. "This was started by a couple of Christmas tree guys in Oregon [he and Holiday Tree Farms growers near Corvallis], but we think it should include all kinds of crops nationwide."

"We think we can tell our story," he says, noting spreading information through the media is key to educating the public. Since the coalition is nonprofit, it hopes to take advantage of public service announcements in print and electronic media.

"Our aim is to cover all the bases of sustainability, including providing a safe workplace for our employees," says Sharp.