



Rotting pear crop illustrates farmers' plight

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Lake and Mendocino county pear orchards are a hopscotch of ruin--some blocks have been harvested, others have been abandoned. Orchard floors are littered with pears turning to mush.

Packinghouse operators say only the very best fruit is being packed and sent to market, harvested by skeleton crews in the worst local labor shortage in memory.

Although consumers won't notice much difference in the supermarket, it's estimated this year's severe labor shortage will result in about 10,000 tons of pears being overripe and dumped.

"It's really sad," said Toni Scully, a pear grower and co-owner of Scully Packing in Scotts Valley. "It's a beautiful crop of pears, and we couldn't pick it in time."

The crop has been struggling to remain profitable for some time and pear farmers were cheered when the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Statistics Service forecast the California Bartlett pear crop would be up about 17 percent compared to 2005.

Many Lake and Mendocino county growers say they had hoped this year's strong crop would help them catch up financially. Instead they say they're experiencing crop losses of 20 percent to 30 percent, perhaps more.

While California farmers who produce specialty crops with short harvest windows have been hit the hardest by the current labor shortage, growers throughout the state say they face the very real prospect of crop losses in the future.

They're calling on Congress to reform the U.S. immigration system and help assure a stable agricultural work force. A team of California Farm Bureau Federation leaders is in Washington, D.C. now, joining farmers and ranchers from across the nation in a "fly-in" to continue pressing for



Lake County pear grower Toni Scully surveys fruit loss in her Scotts Valley orchard due to a lack of harvest labor. Workers for her growing and packing operations were down by as much as 50 percent to 75 percent during this summer's harvest.

comprehensive immigration reform.

"We're going to Washington again to give an account of the concerns in California and emphasize the crop losses farmers have already experienced due to a lack of labor and advise them of the potential for future losses," said Jack King, CFBF National Affairs manager. "We cannot let up."

Scully blames this year's pear crop losses on a number of factors, including a late harvest due to weather conditions. But she said the biggest problem by far is the lack of skilled pickers--in some cases a labor shortage of as much as 50 percent to 75 percent.

"They (members of Congress) all say they love the family farmer, but I don't feel that love," Scully told local media last week in the midst of her ruined crop. "They're putting me out of business."

Tighter border security, competition for workers from other industries and a broken temporary worker program have all conspired to create a dire labor shortage for this small, but valuable crop, she said.

Pears have been grown in California since the Gold Rush, but each year the acreage shrinks.

"We're facing crop losses as high as 30 percent," said Scully. "Almost every grower has had to go in and pick and choose his strongest blocks, turning his back on others.

"What people don't realize is that we're a small community," Scully said. "At the peak of our season, we need about 900 pickers to get our crop off in the three-week window Mother Nature provides. We need another 600 in the packinghouses.

Kelseyville, where much of Lake County's pear growing and packing is centered, has a total population of about 3,000. During the harvest that's just wrapping up, Scully said the community pitched in to help in the crisis. Retired people, stay-at-home moms and high school kids have been filling some jobs in the packinghouses, but she said the picking on 12-foot ladders needs to be done by experienced workers.

If the border crackdown continues without a guest worker program, she said, "most family farmers around here will go out of business."

"Do people want to maintain the high-quality food supply we have in this country?" Scully asked. "If they do, then they need to recognize that some agricultural areas need a way to get skilled workers, particularly from Mexico.

"These people aren't immigrants. They come here and work and then go home to their families and the country they love."

Scully said several of the growers who use her packing shed have already told her they're going to bulldoze their orchards.

"I don't know if I'll try one more year," said Nick Ivicovich, 69, who has been growing pears in Lake County for 45 years. His orchards include one of the county's oldest, a 3-acre block first planted in 1885.

He chokes up when talk turns to the possibility of removing his orchards, which his family had hoped to continue farming.

Ivicovich said production costs for his crop are about \$2,500 an acre, with an additional \$1,000 an acre needed to cover harvest costs. The past few years have been financially challenging, he said. Rising production costs, competition from China and weather conditions have all made it hard

for Lake County pear growers to make a profit.

But this year's crop looked so good he said he felt like the struggle was worth it.

"This is what I waited for my whole lifetime, is what I was thinking," Ivcevich said.

He expected to harvest 2,100 tons of premium pears, compared with last year's 1,400 tons. His hopes began sinking when his contracted picking crews were held up by late-ripening crops in the Sacramento Valley. They arrived 10 days late for harvest.

Ivcevich is not alone in his disappointment and concern for the future of what has been Lake County's signature crop. Growers say beyond this year's labor disaster there's anxiety about the availability of an adequate work force in the future.

Bob Rentsch of Bella Vista Farming said the farm management company picked pears last week in Lake County and ended up leaving about 1,000 tons of fruit on the trees of an orchard that produced about 8,000 tons.

"There just weren't enough people to pick them," he said. "I've never seen this happen before. We figure we were at least 20 percent short of the workers we needed to get the crop in."

In response to CFBF's 2006 harvest survey, one Lake County pear grower commented: "Lack of workers resulted in a loss of fruit due to maturity and consequently a large decrease in revenue. Also, due to a shortage of workers, we have been held hostage for increased costs.

"We need a guest worker or other program to increase the labor supply for all perishable crops."

Another Lake County pear grower said: "We faced a record large crop this August with a record shortage of pickers. We've gradually added a few more, but it's too late now. We've lost 15 percent to 20 percent to ripeness. We'll know more about losses when harvest concludes."

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