Oregon strawberries: Still great, just fewer of them

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Oregon production has declined 30 percent in past five years Within a month, Oregon strawberries are expected to be ready for harvest, unofficially marking the beginning of the growing season. But for the state's strawberry industry, competition and other factors have left production at a fraction of what it once was. Niche marketing for both processed and fresh fruit is keeping the commodity alive, but it will probably never return to its glory days. Oregon producers are projected to harvest about 2,000 acres of strawberries this year. That's more than a 30 percent drop from the 3,130 acres harvested as recently as 2003 and less than half of the acreage harvested ten years ago. Still, the Oregon strawberry remains a signature crop for many folks."Oregon strawberries are noted world-wide for their unique color and great, sweet flavor," says Dalton Hobbs, assistant director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture. "They have a special niche finding favor in super-premium products like ice cream and yogurt where flavor and color are paramount. There is no finer small fruit on the planet than an Oregon strawberry."If it were just a matter of quality, Oregon strawberries would reign supreme. They are picked absolutely ripe on the vine, they are red both inside and outside the fruit, and they have a wonderful texture after canning, freezing, or drying. However, a combination of competition and costs has eroded the state's strong showing as a strawberry producer. Oregon still ranks third in the U.S. when it comes to production, but remains far behind berry giants California and Florida, producing only 1.1 percent of the nation's strawberries. Foreign competition from Mexico is also a major factor. According to the Oregon Agricultural Statistics Service, 2,100 acres were harvested last year, producing 11,500 tons of fruit- a production value of $15.9 million. That's a far cry from the high point of $31 million a decade ago."California and Mexico are producing such a large volume of fresh strawberries," says Bernadine Strik, extension berry crops professor with Oregon State University's Department of Horticulture. "Even though they only process about 25 percent of what they produce, that is still a tremendous volume of fruit and about 30 times what Oregon produces for processing. That volume of strawberries is so much cheaper than what our growers can produce. So we've seen a very rapid decline in our industry."Oregon strawberries are still primarily destined for processing. The varieties grown in Oregon are not suited for long-distance shipping for fresh sales. There has been some success marketing processed product domestically and to export markets like Japan. Growers usually concede the fresh market to California, with the exception of a few local producers who sell at farmers' markets, farm stands, and offer their own u-pick fields. It appears price most often trumps everything else.
"The main reason for the decline of Oregon's strawberry industry is the increased cost of production, therefore the increased cost that buyers of our processed fruit have to pay compared to California strawberries," says Strik. "While California processes only a quarter of its total production, that's still a whopping 250,000 tons of strawberries. As a result, their price is much less than ours. Unfortunately, there is a much smaller niche market for the higher-priced, higher-quality processed strawberry from Oregon."Strik recalls a conversation she had with a food manufacturer that produced strawberry pies. She wanted to know why the processor didn't use Oregon berries and was simply told they were more expensive. When Strik suggested consumers would pay more for an Oregon strawberry pie compared to one made with fruit from California or Florida, the processor said consumers wouldn't know the difference.Local strawberry processors have also declined in recent years with only about half as many in Oregon as there were in the 1980s. Consolidation of buyers as well as processors has also impacted the available market for Oregon strawberry growers and has kept the price paid for the fruit from being stronger. In the meantime, operating expenses for growers have risen, in part, due to Oregon's relatively high minimum wage."In general, our growers pay pickers more per pound to hand pick the fruit than what the California finished product is sold for," says Strik. "That is partly why our growers struggle to make a living growing this crop. California growers have the advantage of lower labor rates, a yield per acre that is more than three times what our growers can achieve, and a large share of their production going for the higher value fresh market"The picture isn't totally bleak. Health-related research and advertising have created an awareness and demand for strawberries. Per capita consumption hit a record high of 5.8 pounds of fresh strawberries in 2005. However, consumption of frozen strawberries is much less at 2.2 pounds per person. Oregon berries are a big hit at local farm stands and farmers' markets. Direct marketing remains a viable alternative for some growers who often produce a wide array of berries."I think consumers can play a role in helping our industry because there is a lot of good Oregon strawberry fruit available at

farmers' markets and pick-your-own farms," says Strik.Many Oregon strawberry growers are looking at value-added products such as syrups and jams that can be produced themselves or in partnership with a food processor. It's all designed to justify the effort of growing a crop that these days is making less sense- and cents."We have fewer growers mainly because producers are focusing on other berries that have a better market," says Strik. "Still, many of our producers grow strawberries because they love to. Some years they can make money, other years they lose. It's the love of strawberry farming and tradition that keeps them going."It's a far cry from the days when so many of today's adults earned money picking strawberries in Oregon. But despite the current challenges, the industry does not appear to be going away any time soon.

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