Strawberry summit aims to revitalize an Oregon icon

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Can anything be done to reverse the trend of a declining Oregon strawberry industry? Attendees of a one-day strawberry summit next week hope the answer is yes and will try to identify strategies to revitalize what was once a major Oregon agricultural commodity."The strawberry is an icon of Oregon agriculture," says Gary Roth, administrator of the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Development and Marketing Division. "There are more than 220 commodities produced in this state. All of them are important and worth saving. Strawberries is certainly one of those at the top of the list."ODA and the Oregon Strawberry Commission are co-sponsoring the 2007 Oregon Strawberry Summit on Tuesday, October 30 at Clackamas Community College in Oregon City. Growers, handlers, processors, retailers, food service representatives-anyone with a vested interest in Oregon strawberries are invited to attend. Summit planners hope that by the end of the day, key challenges to the industry and potential solutions will be identified and prioritized. "The approach we are taking is to examine all aspects of what's ailing this industry and invite everyone who is connected to help develop solutions," says Roth.Competition and other factors have left Oregon strawberry production at a fraction of what it once was. Niche marketing for both processed and fresh fruit has kept the commodity alive, but it may never return to its glory days. Oregon producers harvested 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. Production value has dropped 50 percent during the same period of time to less than $16 million. 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.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."Everyone involved is concerned about the possibility of Oregon's strawberry industry basically going away," says ODA Trade Manager Laura Barton, who has helped organize the summit. "As an agency that helps our producers, we didn't want to sit idly by and watch production continue to decline."

Barton has helped shape the agenda for next week's summit by bringing in a variety of speakers with success stories who will set the tone for further discussion. That includes a wild blueberry processor to address the processing side and a North Carolina strawberry grower to talk about the fresh market side. Another presentation will focus on food service, retail, and industrial buyers, and their perspective on selling both fresh and frozen strawberries. One of the featured speakers will be an executive from Haagen Dazs, the premium ice cream company that has long desired Oregon strawberries because of their taste and strong red color.A panel discussion will feature trends and practices of strawberry production that might give Oregon an advantage. The bulk of the summit, however, is dedicated to smaller group discussions to identify top issues and potential solutions with all participants reconvening to review the discussions and prioritize next steps.There are no pre-conceived ideas on what issues should be tackled first. But some challenges facing the industry are obvious. Labor is one, but not the only area expected to be high on the list of topics at the summit."By investigating creative ways to produce, harvest, handle, and package the strawberries, we might be able to turn it around," says Barton. "You can't just say it's a labor issue and leave it at that."Still, labor is enough of a factor that representatives from the Oregon Employment Department and the Bureau of Labor and Industries will be on hand during the summit."In general, our growers pay pickers more per pound to hand pick the fruit than what the California finished product is sold for," says Bernadine Strik, extension berry crops professor with Oregon State University's Department of Horticulture, who is also scheduled to attend the summit. "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."What happens after the summit will depend on how the discussions turn out. Barton says it is possible that small work groups may be formed to address the top issues identified by the entire group. The next steps may require financial assistance from outside the industry. There might need to be another summit, perhaps next year at the same time. Much will hinge on the

results of next week.ODA officials are hopeful that progress will be made."If we can just stop the decline of our strawberry industry, it will be a success," says Roth. "If we can actually increase production, I think that's a success. If we can diversify the range of products that are produced by our strawberry industry, that's a success. I'm hoping we can begin to put in motion some programs and activities that will help put this industry back on the upswing in terms of production and profitability."Oregon strawberries have a rich history. The industry and the Oregon Department of Agriculture are determined to see that it has a bright future.

Strawberry summit aims to revitalize an Oregon icon by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources