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THE VANCOUVER SUN

Cold, wet spring adds up to big blueberry losses: B.C. growers are facing losses of up to \$20 million

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Byline: **Richard Chu**
Source: Vancouver Sun

Blueberry growers in B.C. are facing financial losses of more than \$20 million with a significantly smaller than expected crop due to cold, wet spring and early summer weather.

"We were looking at our biggest season ever. We anticipated 70 million pounds this year, but we are 20 to 30 per cent off from last year," said Geraldine Auston, executive director of the B.C. Blueberry Council.

"We are now hoping to reach 55 million pounds, but it could be as low as 50 million."

B.C.'s 2005 blueberry harvest was expected to have a farm gate value of about \$84 million, the council estimated back in July.

Last year, about 63 million pounds of blueberries were produced, up from 50 million pounds in 2003.

Auston said to have such a large drop in production is a significant blow to the industry given another 1,500 acres were planted in 2003, to a total of 9,500 acres producing across the province. "It's a huge loss in the field," she said.

Gord Cheema of Fraser Valley Packers in Abbotsford said the cold, damp weather discouraged the bees from properly pollinating the blueberry plants, resulting in much smaller berries.

"For every eighth of an inch you're off, you lose a ton, and that's a lot of berries," he said. "The machines can't harvest them because they're too small, they won't shake off and pickers won't pick them because they won't make enough money harvesting them," he said.

"Last year, sales were \$10 million, this year, I think we're going to be down 30 per cent," he said.

"Our anticipation was to have 20 per cent more than last year. All our packaging and sales were based on that, so really, in our view, we're down 50 per cent."

Auston said growers knew the weather would impact the harvest, but they didn't anticipate how severe it would be. "We thought it only affected one variety, but it affected the three major varieties we grow," she said.

Rajinder Lally of Lally Farms said last year, he had annual sales of \$16 million in blueberries, but "we're not going to achieve that this year.

"In spring, we were thinking it was going to be a bumper crop, then we thought it would be a good crop, then an okay crop. No one thought there would be 20 to 30 per cent less crop," he said.

Auston said blueberry production throughout North America has fallen due to unusual weather, resulting in higher prices, but not enough to fully offset the loss in production. "Because of the losses being so high, the higher rate growers will get may help them break even," she said.

IMAGES



(Blueberries.)
**Restricted,
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Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun
Gord Cheema of Fraser Valley Packers stands beside thousands of empty flats that were supposed to be coming in to the plant full of blueberries. The harvest could be as low as 50 million pounds.
**(FPinfomart: Allowed,
Canada.com: Allowed)**

To make things worse, B.C. blueberry growers also faced added costs due to delays caused by the port strike.

Auston said growers who had to ship berries to Japan, had to pay the added cost of trucking it to the Port of Seattle and pay assessment fees when they crossed the border.

Cheema said his shipments of frozen berries to Japan have been delayed ever since June 27 when the strike began. "We were scheduled to ship then, and throughout the month of July, but we weren't able to ship our product until now," he said.

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HARVEST BLUES:

The B.C. Blueberry Council is blaming wet, cool weather in early summer as it lowers its 2005 crop harvest estimate by 15 million to 20 million pounds, or as much as 30 per cent.

70 million pounds:

Council's forecast in July for the 2005 harvest.

55 million to 50 million pounds:

Council's revised forecast for the 2005 harvest.

63 million pounds:

Actual 2004 harvest.

#2: B.C.'s global position in terms of highbush (most common cultivated type) blueberry harvest. Michigan in the U.S. is No. 1.

Source: B.C. Blueberry Council

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: (Blueberries.)
- Colour Photo: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun / Gord Cheema of Fraser Valley Packers stands beside thousands of empty flats that were supposed to be coming in to the plant full of blueberries. The harvest could be as low as 50 million pounds.

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