

# AGRICULTURE 2026

## Horticultural Society sets annual meeting Feb. 11

THE OKANOGAN HORTICULTURAL Society will host its annual meeting Tuesday, Feb. 11, offering a full day of pest management and horticultural education for growers and industry professionals.

The in-person meeting will run from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. and is co-sponsored by Washington State University Extension and the Okanogan County Horticultural Association. No pre-registration is required, and admission is \$10, payable at the door. Attendees may earn three to four Washington State Department of Agriculture pesticide education credits, pending approval.

The program will focus on current research, emerging tools and practical strategies related to tree fruit production. Topics include codling moth management, apple maggot biology and policy

updates, tree fruit nutrition, soil health, sunburn and sunflare issues, and orchard technology.

The day will begin with a presentation by Tory Schmidt of the Washington State Tree Fruit Research Commission, who will discuss optimizing thinning practices and new chemical tools available to growers. WSU entomologist Betsy Beers will follow with a session on codling moth netting and insecticide timing, focusing on cost-effective conventional management strategies. Tobin Northfield, also of WSU Entomology, will present an update on organic codling moth management, including virus resistance.

After a midmorning break, Carolina Torres of WSU Horticulture will address strategies for minimizing greasiness in Cosmic Crisp apples, followed by an update on Sunflare and

the new WSU apple variety WA 64 from Kate Evans of WSU Horticulture.

Late morning programming will include a presentation by Wee Yee of USDA-ARS on apple maggot biology, host preference and management options, with an emphasis on hawthorn-related issues in Okanogan County and detection methods using traps.

A sponsored lunch will be provided by Coulee Farms.

Afternoon sessions will resume with Bernardita Sallato of WSU Extension speaking on tree fruit nutrition, followed by Tianna DuPont of WSU Extension, who will introduce a new long-term soil health site aimed at minimizing tree stress and enhancing the orchard microbiome. The final presentation will feature Lav Knot of AWN WSU, who will showcase new tools for orchard management,

### Meeting schedule at a glance

9 a.m.	Optimize your Thinning and New Tools, Tory Schmidt, WSTFRC	WA 64.
	Overview of current chemical thinning options including new products	
9:25 a.m.	Codling Moth Netting and Insecticides, Betsy Beers, WSU Entomology	11:30 a.m. Apple Maggot Biology, host preference and management options, Wee Yee, USDA-ARS
	Critical timings with the most cost effective materials for conventional insect management.	Hawthorn preference and related issues, specifically in Okanogan. Potential management options for horticultural pest boards. Older data on detection of adults using traps.
9:50 a.m.	Organic Codling Moth Management, Tobin Northfield, WSU Entomology	11:55 a.m. Lunch
	Organic management. Update on virus resistance.	1:30 p.m. Tree Fruit Nutrition, Bernardita Sallato, WSU Extension
10:15 a.m.	Break	2 p.m. New Long Term Soil Health Site – Seeking to Minimize Stress and Enhance the Microbiome, Tianna DuPont, WSU Extension
10:35 a.m.	Minimizing Cosmic Crisp Greasiness, Carolina Torres, WSU Horticulture	2:30 p.m. New Tools for Orchard Management from AWN, Lav Knot, AWN WSU
11 a.m.	Sunflare, Kate Evans, WSU Horticulture	New iOS app, new web portal, and AWN Smart Farm Platform
	An update on the new WSU apple variety	2:40 p.m. Closing and Pesticide Credits

including a new iOS app, web portal and the AWN Smart Farm Platform. The meeting will conclude with closing remarks and the awarding of

pesticide education credits. Brent Vanbuskirk is the vendor contact for the event and can be reached at brent.vanbuskirk@nutrien.com or

509-429-5877. WSDA pesticide education certification credits will be awarded for program attendance.

## U.S. apple growers report another strong production year

AFTER TWO CONSECUTIVE years of above-average output, U.S. apple growers expected another strong season, according to a report released by the U.S. Apple Association.

The report, "Industry Outlook 2025," was authored by USAApple Vice President of Insights and Analytics Chris Gerlach and provided analysis of domestic and global apple production, utilization and trade. The outlook incorporated U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates, along with additional analysis by USAApple that accounted for production in states outside the nation's top seven apple producers and feedback from growers on field conditions.

USAApple forecast total U.S. apple production for the 2025-26 crop year at 11.7 billion pounds, or 278.5 million bushels. That figure was up 1.3% from the previous year and 3.6% above the five-year production average.

"The U.S. grows the best apples in the world, and this year we will certainly have plenty for domestic and global consumption," Gerlach said at the conference. "That said, growers carefully select what comes off the tree to ensure only the highest quality fruit makes it to the store. And with skyrocketing labor costs, growers are having to be even more disciplined in their harvest decisions."

At the varietal level, Gala was expected to remain the nation's top apple, with production nearing 47 million bushels, or about 16% of total U.S. output. Red Delicious was forecast at 39 million bushels, followed by Honeycrisp at 34 million bushels, Granny Smith at 32 million bushels and Fuji at 25 million bushels. USAApple reported that Honeycrisp, Granny Smith, Cosmic Crisp and Pink Lady, also known as Cripps Pink, were trending upward, while Gala, Fuji and Rome were trending down.

On the trade front, fresh apple exports declined 5% year over year, but the United States maintained a strong trade balance during the 2024-25 marketing year, which ran from July through June. Exports totaled 44 million bushels, while imports remained below 5 million bushels, resulting in net exports of about 40 million bushels valued at roughly \$900 million.

"With another large crop on the way, maintaining and expanding exports is essential," Gerlach said. "We're exploring all avenues to strengthen our presence in established markets like Taiwan, Thailand, and India, while pushing to open new high-value markets such as South Korea and Japan."

Washington was projected to lead the nation in apple production, with a forecasted



Apple trees stand heavy with fruit during 2025 harvest season, according to the U.S. Apple Association.

record crop exceeding 180 million bushels valued at nearly \$2.3 billion, an increase of 1% from the prior season.

New York was expected to remain the second-largest producer at 30.5 million bushels, a decrease of 0.7%.

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Michigan production was forecast to rise 10% to about 30 million bushels, while Pennsylvania was projected to increase 2% to 10.5 million bushels. Virginia's crop was expected to fall 50% to 2.75 million bushels, while Oregon was forecast to climb 40% to 3.9 million bushels.

Globally, United Nations data showed worldwide apple production exceeding 5 billion bushels. In the most recent data available from 2023, "With China down 100 million bushels and Turkey's crop off by 40%, the U.S. had a real opportunity," Gerlach said. "Given Turkey's role as a major supplier to India, this could open the door for us to regain market share there."



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## Cattle inventory dips slightly

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The nation's cattle inventory edged lower at the start of 2026, continuing a modest downward trend, according to a report released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

There were 86.2 million head of cattle and calves on U.S. farms as of Jan. 1, slightly below the 86.5 million head recorded a year earlier, the USDA said in its annual cattle report.

All cows and heifers that had calved totaled 37.2 million head, down slightly from 37.3 million on Jan. 1, 2025. Beef cows accounted for 27.6 million head, a 1% decline from the previous year, while the nation's milk cow herd increased 2% to 9.57 million head.

Heifers weighing 500 pounds and over totaled 18.0 million head, down 1% from a year earlier. Beef replacement heifers rose 1% to 4.71 million head, while milk replacement heifers slipped slightly to 3.90 million head. Other heifers totaled 9.40 million head, a 2% decline from 2025.

Steers weighing 500 pounds and over totaled 15.6 million head, down 1% from a year earlier. Bulls weighing 500 pounds and over increased

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## Cherry Growers see big crop, small returns in 2025

**W**ASHINGTON STATE cherry growers harvested one of their largest and highest-quality crops in years during the 2025 season, but the bounty came with a downside: some of the weakest prices growers have seen in more than a decade.

Industry observers said the season delivered outstanding fruit marked by strong sizing, rich color and good flavor, with little damage from extreme heat. Production across the Northwest climbed well above 2024 levels, with some growing areas reporting increases of nearly 30 percent.

That success in the orchards, however, collided with tough

market realities.

An early start to the harvest pushed large volumes of Washington cherries into stores while California fruit was still widely available. The overlap created an oversupplied market, driving prices well below what growers typically expect. Peak harvest arrived quickly and with heavy volume, intensifying the pricing pressure throughout the season.

Growers also faced additional headwinds, including higher operating costs and labor challenges tied to ongoing immigration concerns, further squeezing already thin margins.

## State pear crops rebound

**W**ASHINGTON'S PEAR industry had a strong comeback in 2025, with growers celebrating one of the largest crops in recent memory after 2024's historically small harvest.

Production across Washington was projected to climb sharply, rising an estimated 46% to 60% from 2024 levels. Growers expected between 16 million and 19 million boxes of pears, fueled by favorable weather conditions throughout the growing cycle. The rebound follows a 2024 crop that fell to a 40-year low.

Statewide, the harvest was estimated at roughly 280,000 tons, representing a dramatic recovery in volume across all major pear varieties. Industry officials said the turnaround reflected consistent spring moisture, moderate summer temperatures and reduced weather-related stress on orchards.

The surge extends beyond Washington. USA Pears reported total Pacific Northwest production — including Washington and Oregon — was up about 78% compared to 2024, with combined output nearing 19 million boxes. Several varieties posted especially strong gains, including Bosc pears, which are saw yields rebound by as much as 250%. Bartlett and Anjou pears also showed increases.

In addition to volume, growers reported high fruit quality. Industry groups said the size, color and overall condition of the crop could create expanded promotional opportunities for retailers, potentially boosting pear sales nationwide.

Looking ahead, as of early 2026, the state pear market is experiencing steady, stable pricing with moderate demand.

## Grape harvest yields strong quality

**F**AVORABLE WEATHER conditions during the 2025 growing season produced high-quality wine grapes across the state, with winemakers describing the harvest as a potential standout for flavor and balance.

The harvest began earlier than usual in late August following a warm, dry spring and progressed

steadily through September under consistent summer conditions. Growers reported few extreme heat events and low moisture, which helped promote even ripening.

Despite the lighter crop, both red and white varieties showed strong concentration, good color and balanced characteristics.

## Low snowpack keeps drought concerns alive

CARLEEN JOHNSON  
*The Center Square*

**T**HE STATE DEPARTMENT of Ecology said last month that record rainfall (in Western Washington) and recent heavy snowfall in the mountains may not have done enough to bring drought relief for this year's dry season, which typically runs from late spring through summer into early fall.

"Low snowpack in many Washington river basins means drought remains on the table for 2026," the Department of Ecology said in a Tuesday blog. "The December weather drama leaves us with an obvious question: All of that precipitation did a whole lot of damage, but did it do any good?"

According to Ecology, the low snowpack is the major concern.

The blog goes on to say, "The massive atmospheric rivers that hit Washington in December did put some much-needed water into our reservoirs — storage in the six Yakima Basin reservoirs now stands at 135% of typical levels for this point of the year ... there is no substitute for snow."

According to University of Washington atmospheric scientist Cliff Mass, there is no reason Ecology should be predicting drought conditions based on recent heavy rains and snowfall predictions for the coming weeks.

"There is no drought now by any reasonable evaluation," he said. "Our precipitation has been extraordinary the last month or so. And so right now the reservoirs are all full."

Water reservoirs are above normal in most cases, Mass said.

"The water level is extremely good in every reservoir, and that's including the Yakima Basin," he said. "So that's great. Soil moisture, wonderful. So, precipitation in reservoirs is great."

Ecology's blog said the challenge with snowpack in years past has been early melt-off.

"Even if we get the snow,



Officials continue to weigh drought risks for the 2026 growing season amid concerns about low mountain snowpack.

we haven't been able to keep it... this is becoming the new normal in Washington. Climate change has transformed snowy winters into rainy ones, and the snow we do get doesn't last as long as we need it to."

An overreliance on the mountain snowpack for water reservoirs is increasingly challenging, Mass pointed out.

Drought significantly impacts the state by straining water supplies, harming agriculture, increasing wildfire risk, impacting fisheries with higher water temperatures and disease, and depleting groundwater. The latter can lead to water use restrictions for residents and economic losses, especially in Eastern Washington's irrigated areas like the Yakima Basin.

Mass does not deny climate change.

"It's clear the Earth is slowly warming," he said. "It is also clear that by the end of the century, they'll probably be 30% or something like that, less snow available to melt. So, if we're wise, we'll cut back our use of water, be more efficient with it, and we need to have additional storage capacity."

Ecology Communications Manager Jimmy Norris

responded to follow-up questions from *The Center Square* via email, indicating that the coming months will provide a clearer picture of this year's dry season.

"It's still too early to tell what spring and summer will look like," he said. "While some areas currently seem to have plenty of snowpack, the spring melt off may very well be absorbed by soil moisture and storage deficits. An early spring could likewise erase a lot of the gains from December."

Mass said that, given the recent record rainfall and snowfall, reservoir levels, and the fact that Washington is currently in a La Niña weather pattern, there is no reason to sound the alarm for drought.

La Niña is a climate pattern characterized by cooler-than-average sea surface temperatures in the tropical Pacific Ocean, which disrupts global atmospheric circulation, often bringing wetter conditions to the Pacific Northwest.

"There's no reason logically to expect a problem," Mass said. "There are some people (who) I do think have an agenda. And there are some people sort of in the drought business. There's a drought monitor community that has been promoting drought. I mean, if you're in the drought business, you want drought. And I think they're doing that. They're trying to twist the facts to make us think we're in a drought when we're really not."

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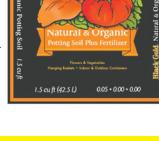
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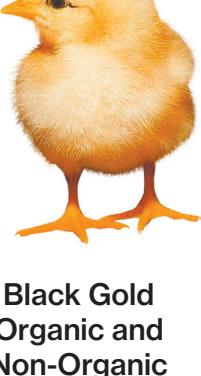
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# Eastern Washington Homesteading Expo returns April 24-26

By BROCK HIRE  
*The Chronicle*

OKANOGAN — The second annual Eastern Washington Homesteading Expo will return to the Okanogan County Fairgrounds, 175 Rodeo Trail, April 24-26, bringing together homesteaders, growers and families from across the region to learn, share skills and build community connections.

Founded in 2025 by Susan Cooksey of Palmer Lake Homestead, the Eastern Washington Homesteading Expo (EWHE) was created to provide a local gathering place for people interested in self-sufficiency and traditional homesteading practices. Cooksey said the goal of the event is to connect like-minded individuals in eastern Washington and beyond while encouraging practical skills that support rural and sustainable living.

Cooksey grew up on her family's farm near Palmer Lake in northern Okanogan County, where she was surrounded by cattle, horses, chickens, a commercial apple orchard and the occasional pig. Raised by parents who lived through the Great Depression, she learned skills rooted in frugality and self-reliance, including food preservation, meat processing, sewing, cooking and baking.



SUBMITTED PHOTO  
A speaker gives a presentation at the 2025 Eastern Washington Homesteading Expo.

A former classroom teacher, Cooksey continues to educate others through hands-on demonstrations and workshops.

After attending larger homesteading events such as the Modern Homesteading Conference in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and the Alaska Homestead Expo in Big Lake, Alaska, Cooksey said she realized a similar event could succeed in Okanogan County.

"I wanted people in eastern Washington to get together who were like minded, homesteading, and give them a place to

get together and network with other homesteaders," she said.

With help from Karla Stucker and other volunteers, the first EWHE was organized in 2025 with limited advertising but strong turnout, she said. That inaugural expo featured 26 vendors, more than 25 presentations from 19 presenters, and an estimated 350 adult participants and children.

The success of the first year led to the formation of a core planning group for this year's expo, including Cooksey, Stucker, Jerian Ashley, Tami

Brathobde, Yolanda Leffler, Ed and Rachel Lawrence and others.

Organizers said interest has grown significantly, with more than 40 vendors expressing interest this year, even before widespread promotion.

This year's expo will take place primarily in the Agriplex and Quonset huts at the fairgrounds, with animal-related vendors located in the Quonset huts and some outdoor areas. Food vendors, an espresso wagon and agricultural displays are also planned, with

the 2025 calf crop.

To compile the report, NASS surveyed approximately 35,000 producers nationwide during the first half of January, collecting cattle inventory data as of Jan. 1, 2026, and calf crop information for the entire 2025 calendar year through internet, mail, telephone and in-person interviews.

accounted for 82.7% of all cattle on feed, up slightly from the previous year.

The combined total of calves under 500 pounds and other heifers and steers over 500 pounds outside of feedlots stood at 24.5 million head, about 1% higher than a year earlier.

The report also showed a

smaller calf crop. The 2025 U.S. calf crop was estimated at 32.9 million head, down 2% from the previous year. Calves born during the first half of 2025 were estimated at 24.2 million head, also down 2% from the same period in 2024. Calves born during the second half of the year totaled 8.70 million head, accounting for 26% of

the 2025 calf crop.

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organizers working to bring in greenhouses and chicken coops for demonstration.

Activities begin Friday morning with a special home-school-focused event starting at 8 a.m., offering rotating, hands-on homesteading activities for students, including butter making and non-machine ice cream production. Vendor setup will take place during this time, with the expo opening to the general public at 11 a.m. Friday and Saturday. Vendor booths and presentations will run until 8 p.m. both days, followed by a family dance from 8 to 10 p.m. Friday night.

Saturday's programming will begin at 8 a.m. and feature an expanded slate of demonstrations, including livestock and meat processing.

"Chickens are the gateway livestock into homesteading," Cooksey said. "Gardening is a gateway into homesteading."

Cooksey said sessions will include chick hatching, poultry care, rabbit processing and pig processing demonstrations.

Double S Meats is sponsoring pig processing demonstrations, which will cover humane dispatch, skinning and evisceration on the first day, followed by cutting and breakdown techniques on the second day.

Sunday's events will begin

with an all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast in the annex, followed by a cowboy church service led by local resident Jim Freese, with music included. The keynote speaker, Larry Littrell, will present on the theme "Bloom Where You're Planted." All Sunday activities, aside from the breakfast, will be free to the public.

The weekend will conclude with a pie social at 2 p.m. Sunday, where attendees are encouraged to bring a pie and spend time visiting and networking. Organizers will provide utensils, coffee and tea. Cooksey said the social is designed as an intergenerational gathering and an opportunity for relaxed conversation among homesteaders and community members.

Organizers are also exploring the possibility of historical displays highlighting homesteading life of the past, such as antique treadle sewing machines and other household tools.

For more information, see "Eastern Washington Homesteading Expo" on social media, email [ewhomesteadingexpo@gmail.com](mailto:ewhomesteadingexpo@gmail.com), or see <https://sites.google.com/view/ewhomesteadingexpo?usp=sharing>.

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from page A5

Cattle and calves on feed for the slaughter market totaled 13.8 million head on Jan. 1, 2026, a 3% decrease from the 14.3 million head reported a year earlier. Feedlots with a capacity of 1,000 head or more

accounted for 82.7% of all cattle on feed, up slightly from the previous year.

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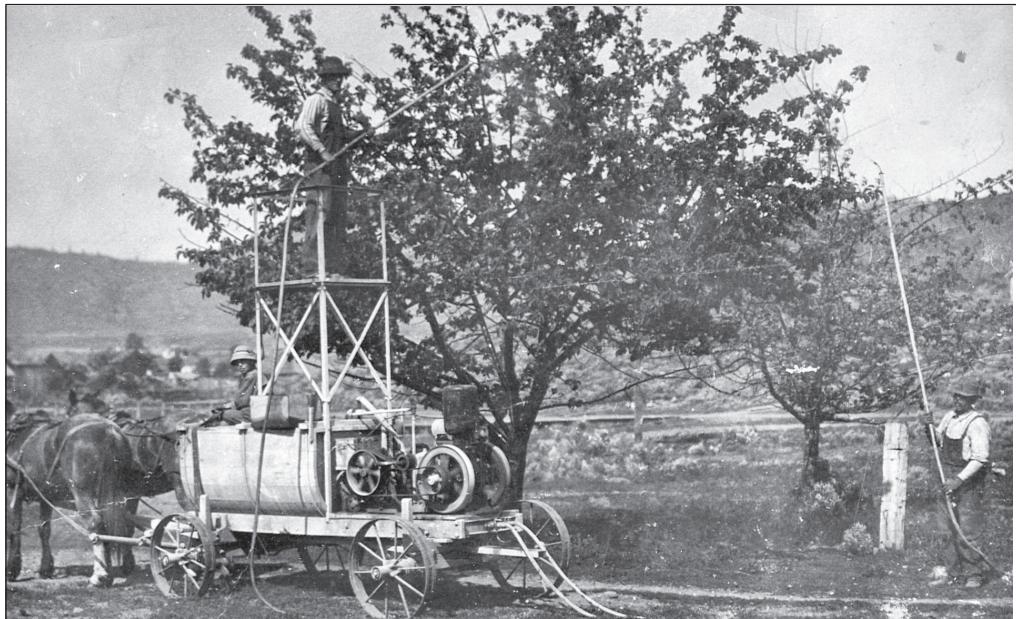
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FRANK S. MATSURA/OKANOGAN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
A sternwheeler leaves Omak for Wenatchee for a tour of the city and a baseball game. Omak Fruit Growers was the name of the Omak town team.

# AGRICULTURE Through the Years



FRANK S. MATSURA | Okanogan County Historical Society  
Unidentified men spray an apple tree in the Okanogan area.



THE CHRONICLE  
A farmer prepares to ship a load of apples in the 1950s.



BROWN COLLECTION | Okanogan County Historical Society  
An early orchard on Pogue Flat near Omak.



FRANK S. MATSURA | Okanogan County Historical Society  
Goods wait to be shipped from Okanogan in the early 1900s.



THE CHRONICLE  
An unidentified man lights an orchard heater ahead of a brisk evening.



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