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Chelan Fruit devastated by fire

August 17, 2015

On Aug. 17, Chelan Fruit Cooperative began the process of moving forward after the Reach Fire virtually destroyed its operations at Plant No. 1 the previous day. "We're trying to stay as positive as we can," Chief Executive Officer Reggie Collins said in an interview with the [Seattle Times](#).

Chelan Fruit comprises 300 grower-members based in north central Washington. The cooperative is one of Washington's premier grower-packer-shippers of conventional and organic apples, pears, cherries, plums and pluots. Members have production acreage situated from the Canadian border south to central Washington.

Damage to the Chelan Fruit facility is estimated to be between \$50-\$80 million. Among the losses are the physical plant facility, orchard damage, empty apple bins and roughly 450,000 boxes of packed apples.

Marketing activities are handled by Chelan Fresh Marketing. Mac Riggan, the company's director of marketing, spoke with *The Produce News* Aug. 17 and provided additional details about the current situation at Chelan Fruit.

"The good thing was there was no loss of life," he stated. "Plant No. 1 was completely destroyed. But Plant No. 2 is pretty much unscathed." Despite the loss of Plant No. 1, Riggan said Chelan Fruit can still load at a second dock, and packing activity for the new apple crop will be diverted to other locations to keep fruit moving.

Riggan had high praise for Washington's apple producers, saying they don't hesitate to step in when assistance is needed. "That's one thing I love," he commented. "We feel good we will be able to

move forward with the new crop.”

Offices for Chelan Fresh Marketing were also impacted by the fire, as utility cables were burned. Riggan said the company quickly arranged for temporary offices to house its sales staff to keep business running. While phone and Internet services were not available on Aug. 17, he expected service to be restored by Aug. 18 or Aug. 19.

The Reach Fire, started by five separate lightning strikes creating several fires that ultimately merged into one devastating fire on Chelan Butte, was fanned by strong winds on Aug. 14 which caused the fire to change direction and head into south Chelan and across the Columbia River into Douglas County.

According to information provided by Collins, the cooperative is working to relocate its employees to other cooperative facilities, and the company is reaching out to other apple packers for assistance in dealing with the 2015-16 apple crop.

On Aug. 16, Fire Incident Spokesman Wayne Patterson said additional fire crews, including personnel from the Washington National Guard, were being dispatched to fight six fires burning in the region. As of that date, the fires have burned over 155 square miles, and approximately 1,500 people were forced to evacuate.

As of Aug. 17, 25 structures were destroyed in the Reach Fire and another 100 remain threatened. The area fires were listed as national priorities as of Aug. 16.

The Chelan Valley Relief Fund has been set up by the Community Foundation of North Central Washington to help support those affected by area wildfires.

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