

Christmas tree sales on the rise in EDC



A tree gets wrapped at Harris Tree Farm in Pollock Pines. Photo/Harris Tree Farm

By Kathryn Reed

Christmas trees are big business in El Dorado County and the drought is not drying out the money train.

While the number of trees harvested in El Dorado County is going up, that is not true of the whole state. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, California harvested 383,940 trees in 2002, 119,855 in 2007 and 109,045 in 2012.

(Nevada did not record any trees for any of those years.)

In El Dorado County, the 36,100 trees sold in 2014 had a value of \$2.166 million, while in 2013 the 35,808 trees sold were worth \$2.148 million, according to the county's 2014 Agriculture Crop & Livestock Report.

Dee Kobervig, president of the El Dorado County Christmas Tree

Growers Association, said cutting down a tree at a farm is a growing business for her 32 members. (There's about another 30 growers in the county who aren't part of the organization.)



Photo/Harris Tree Farm

Christmas tree tidbits:

- Between 25 million and 30 million live Christmas trees are sold in the U.S. every year.
- There are nearly 350 million Christmas trees growing on farms in the U.S.
- For every harvested Christmas tree, one to three seedlings are planted the following spring.
- There are about 350,000 acres in production for growing Christmas trees in the U.S.
- There are close to 15,000 farms growing Christmas trees in the U.S.
- The top Christmas tree producing states are Oregon, North Carolina, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and

Washington.

- The most common Christmas tree species are: balsam fir, Douglas fir, Fraser fir, noble fir, Scotch pine, Virginia pine and white pine.

Source: *USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, National Christmas Tree Association*

“The demand is probably going to outweigh the amount of trees (in the county),” Kobervig told *Lake Tahoe News*. “A lot of people are getting rid of fake trees.”

Plus, people like to know where their tree came from and to be part of the process.

Those in the industry call it “farm to floor”, a take off from the “farm to fork” food movement.

Many of the smaller farms are already sold-out for this season.

The trees native to the area are red fir, Douglas fir, white fir, and cedar. But most of the farms grow other trees to accommodate consumers. These include noble, Colorado blue spruce, Swiss silver, Grant fir, and Fraser fir.

“The Nordman out of Norway is the No. 1 Christmas tree in Europe. It seems to be growing really well here,” Kobervig said.

The drought has had some impact on the farmers. Trees are not growing as fast without as much water as normal. Usually it’s the seedlings that require irrigation. Farmers have seen a higher mortality rate with the young trees. Spring rain is important to growth and that just hasn’t happened for the last

few years.

“I will admit that some of my noble firs probably had more needle drop because of the heat,” Kobervig said. “Those are trees that normally grow in the Pacific Northwest.”

For Jane Harris of Harris Tree Farm she was watering her seedlings earlier than normal.

With trees taking between 10 and 15 years to reach a sellable size, losing a crop can be devastating.

“A few trees died, but at 4,000 foot elevation it is not as warm as some other farms,” Harris said of her Pollock Pines farm.

What helped this fall was having cold temperatures. This meant the needles were set, which is safer once the tree is cut – it won't dry out as fast and be a fire hazard.

One thing tree farmers do to help sustain their business is employ “stump culture”.

Customers are asked to leave 12 to 18 inches of stump in the ground.

“That stump will grow a new Christmas tree, so when you cut a tree you are not really killing it,” Kobervig explained.

Plus, this method means less soil disturbance and trees growing faster than if it had started as a seedling.