Washington’s 36,000 farms reported sales of $9.6 billion in the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Most farms are small; 30,000 had sales of less than $100,000 in 2020, while 1,450 farms each had sales of $1 million or more.

US agriculture is a 50-50 sector; about half of US farm sales are from crops and half are from animal products. Washington is a crop state: the $7 billion worth of crops were 73 percent of farm sales in 2017. Apples worth $2.4 billion in 2017 were the most valuable crop, followed by cherries, $465 million, grapes, $308 million, and pears, $250 million. Blueberries were worth $115 million, red raspberries $57 million, and strawberries $12 million. Milk sales were $1.2 billion in 2017 and cattle cash receipts were $765 million.

Many of the largest acreage crops generate relatively low revenues per acre, such as the 2.4 million acres of wheat that generate gross revenues of less than $500 an acre, the 700,000 acres of hay that generate less than $750 an acre, or the 195,000 acres of corn that generate less than $1,000 an acre. The 155,000 acres of potatoes generate almost $5,000 an acre, the 42,000 acres of hops $10,500 an acre in 2020, and the 20,000 acres of onions $6,800 an acre.

**Tree Fruit**

Washington’s three major tree fruits are apples, cherries, and pears. The acreage of apples and cherries is increasing, while the acreage of pears is shrinking. The production of apples rose by 30 percent to 3.5 million tons in 2020, the production of cherries fluctuated between 200,000 and 260,000 tons a year, and the production of pears fell 35 percent to 347,000 tons over the decade.

Each of the major tree fruits generates gross revenues of $10,000 to $15,000 an acre, but there is significant variation from year to year in yields and grower prices. In recent years, apples have generated the most stable revenues of about $12,000 an acre, cherries fluctuate between $10,000 and $14,000 an acre, and pear revenue has fallen to less than $10,000 an acre.

Washington had 175,000 bearing acres of apples in 2020 that yielded an average 20 tons an acre or a total 3.5 million tons. Most apples are picked in 925 pound bins that measure 47x47x24.5 except Honeycrisp, which are picked into smaller 690 pound bins to reduce bruising. NASS estimates average yields of 20 tons or 40,000 pounds an acre, which means 43-925 pound bins an acre, while WSU costs and returns studies assume higher yields, from 60-690 pound bins an acre for Honeycrisp to 70-925 pound bins an acre for Gala.

With an average price of $638 a
ton for apples or $0.32 a pound, gross revenues from apple production were $12,000 an acre in 2020, down from the peak of almost $17,000 an acre in 2012 when there were less than 150,000 bearing acres of apples.

Sweet cherry acreage is rising amidst fluctuating yields and prices, making the gross revenue per acre variable. Washington had 40,000 bearing acres of cherries in 2020 that yielded an average five tons an acre worth $2,810 a ton, generating gross revenues of $14,000 per acre.

NASS-reported yields vary from year to year, and ranged from five to eight tons an acre over the past decade, while WSU cost studies assume higher yields, an average 20,000 pounds or 10 tons an acre. Prices in recent years were $1,700 to $2,800 a ton, and variable yields and prices explain why gross revenue per acre ranged from less than $10,000 to over $15,000.

Pear acreage shrank to less than 20,000 bearing acres in 2020. Yields averaged 17.6 tons an acre and grower prices $509 a ton, for gross revenues of $9,000 an acre. Pear yields and grower prices have been falling, explaining why gross revenues have dropped from over $11,000 an acre to less than $9,000 an acre.

Washington also has important berry and grape sectors. The acreage of blueberries more than doubled over the past decade to 18,200 in 2020, while raspberries shrunk to 9,000 acres. Blueberry yields and prices fluctuate, but yields in 2020 averaged 9,200 pounds per acre and growers received $1.30 a pound for gross revenue of $12,000 an acre. Raspberry yields of 9,200 pounds per acre in 2020 and grower prices of $0.91 a pound generated gross revenue of $7,000 an acre.

Some 57,000 of the 76,000 acres of grapes are wine grapes, where yields averaged 3.1 tons an acre in 2020 and grower prices averaged $1,500 a ton, generating gross revenues of $4,700 an acre. Wine grape acreage increased almost 50 percent over the past decade, yields fluctuated, and grower prices rose.

**Employment**

Washington requires almost all farm employers to register with unemployment insurance authorities and report employment for the payroll period that includes the 12th of the month and wages paid to all hired workers who were employed during the month. Since 2001, average employment in WA agriculture (NAICS 11) rose by a quarter, from 75,000 to 100,000. The peak month of employment was July 2020, when the 126,000 employees were 1.6 times the 78,000 in January 2020.
Over 80 percent of the employment in WA agriculture is in crop and crop support. Two decades ago, there were five workers hired directly by crop farms for each worker brought to farms by a nonfarm crop support employer; by 2020, there were 2.5 directly hired crop workers for each worker who was brought to farms by a crop support employer, that is, average crop support employment is increasing while average direct-hire employment in the three fruits that account for over half of crop employment is shrinking.

Within direct-hire crop employment, apples, other berries (non strawberries), and other tree fruits (cherries, pears) account for a declining share of average employment; these three sectors fell from two-thirds of crop employment in 2010 to just over half in 2020.

One reason may be that more workers are being brought to farms by FLCs. Average FLC employment rose from less than 1,000 in the early 2000s to over 5,000 in recent years, mirroring declining direct-hire crop employment. Some of the increase in FLC employment may reflect large tree fruit growers establishing FLCs to pick their own fruit and the fruit of other growers.

The number of employers or establishments reporting directly hired workers fell in each of the tree fruits, and fell fastest for apples. There were over 3,100 apple, other berry, and other tree fruit establishments in the early 2000s, and less than 1,800 in 2020. The number of FLC establishments, by contrast, quadrupled from 25 in the early 2000s to over 100 in 2020.

Wages

Employers report their wages paid and employment, which allows calculation of average weekly earnings. Average weekly earnings in apples, other berries, and other tree fruits were lower than in crop agriculture generally, and lowest in other tree fruit. Average FLC weekly wages of $530 slightly higher than the $517 in other tree fruit.

Annual changes in average weekly wages varied from year-to-year, with the largest variance in activities with the lowest employment. For all crop workers, annual changes in weekly wages ranged from -0.5 percent from 2008 to 2009 to 8.5 percent between 2019 and 2020. Apples had more variation in weekly wages, from -1.2 percent
Employment in Washington Agriculture in July is 1.6x Employment in January and December between 2009 and 2010 to plus 10.7 percent between 2003 and 2004. FLCs had the most variation, from -15.8 percent between 2008 and 2009 to 26.7 percent between 2005 and 2006.

The 2019 to 2020 weekly wage changes ranged from seven to 17 percent, rising fastest where average weekly wages were lowest.

The Number of Apple Employers Fell by Two Thirds Since 2000, While the Number of FLCs Quadrupled

Average Direct-Hire Employment in Apples and Other tree Fruit Fell by 7,000 Over the Past Decade, While FLC Employment Rose by 3,000
Average FLC Weekly Wage Changes were Most Variable, and All Crop and Apple Wages Least Variable (Annual Change in Average Weekly Wages)

Other Berry and FLC Weekly Wages are Lowest, and Rose Fastest Between 2019 and 2020 (Change in Weekly Wages Between 2019 and 2020)

References


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