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DOC Responds to Gov. Gregoire's Call to Help Apple Growers Overcome Labor Shortage during Harvest Season

QUINCY, Grant County – The Department of Corrections and other state agencies are responding to Gov. Chris Gregoire's directive to assist Eastern Washington apple growers with their harvest amid a severe labor shortage. Without assistance soon much of this year's apple harvest could be destroyed by frost.

The Department of Corrections sent about 100 offenders from a minimum-security work camp located near Forks to Grant County. The Department of Natural Resources is assisting with logistical needs, including tents and trailers for showers and food. The apple growers will fully reimburse the agencies for all labor and services so the assistance will not cost any taxpayer dollars.

"Our economy is dependent on strong agricultural sales," Gov. Chris Gregoire said. "With one in three jobs in Washington state connected to trade, we can't afford to let these apples stay on the tree. I'm proud of the work of our state agencies, who worked with growers to develop an innovative solution to this unprecedented challenge. At no cost to Washington taxpayers, we've come up with a way to protect Eastern Washington growers, their communities and our economy."

Gregoire learned earlier this month that apple growers in Eastern Washington were unable to hire enough people to harvest this year's crop before the first frost.

The Employment Security Department, a partner in the WorkSource employment network, activated its yearly farmworker recruitment effort. In addition to opening temporary WorkSource sites near orchards and offering extended hours, Employment Security circulated radio announcements on Central Washington radio stations in an effort to recruit workers.

Last week, the Department of Agriculture set up a meeting with apple growers, representatives from the Governor's office, the Department of Corrections and the Employment Security Department.

"Growers are reporting more concern about labor shortages in the apple orchards this year than any time in the past five years," said Dan Newhouse, Director of the Washington State Department of Agriculture. "If farmers can't get their fruit off the trees before a hard freeze, they have a major disaster on their hands. We're working to fill the gaps, and while this help from Corrections is welcome, we will need to explore other creative solutions to get the crop in."

The Department of Corrections lined up offender work crews similar to the ones that fight wildfires, replant forests and clean parks. The offenders working in Grant County are from [Olympic Corrections Center](#), located near Forks.

“We knew that timing was critical, so we put together a plan as quickly as possible,” said Peter Goldmark, Commissioner of Public Lands. “We’re glad we can assist communities that rely heavily on agriculture this harvest season.”

The offenders, who arrived Sunday are being trained how to use the equipment today and will harvest as many apples as possible before the first significant frost. The contract signed by the apple growers will pay the offenders the prevailing wage, though deductions will include child support, legal and financial obligations, cost of incarceration and crime victim compensation.

“This partnership helps everyone involved,” said Bernie Warner, Secretary of the Department of Corrections. “We help the apple growers and the offenders work to pay off their financial obligations and cost of incarceration.”