

Christmas Tree Industry Strives To Remain A Holiday Necessity

BY LISA BROWN
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ST. LOUIS — Christmas tree knick-knacks cover nearly every visible surface in Irwin Loiterstein’s north St. Louis office.

From tiny tree figurines that line a tree-shaped rack over his desk to the tree backdrop on a wall clock, trees are everywhere.

Loiterstein, 67, who worked in the Christmas tree business for 43 years, owns Seasonable Sales, a wholesaler of trees, wreaths and stands, with sales around the state.

What worries him is that fewer Americans share his passion for real trees. Changing consumer tastes and competition from artificial trees have steadily chipped away at live Christmas tree sales.

In 1990, about 35 million live Christmas trees were sold. That figure dropped to a low of 22 million trees in 2002, according to surveys by the National Christmas Tree Association, a Chesterfield, Mo.-based trade group.

The industry has a voluntary marketing program, which it says helped push sales higher; sales this year are expected to be around 30 million live trees.

But an attempt last month to implement a “check-off” fee on U.S. growers and importers to pay for marketing was put on hold indefinitely after critics labeled it a “Christmas tax.”

Betty Malone, an Oregon tree farmer who leads a group of check-off supporters, said the industry will continue to push for the fee.

“Farmers know how to grow trees, but we’re not really good marketers,” she said. “We can’t just coast on the fact that we know it’s a good product. We know we have to do something.”

Since the 1980s, a task force of Christmas tree growers and wholesalers across the country has worked to raise funds to promote the purchase of live trees.

To date, the fund-raising efforts have been voluntary, and “boosted sales each time we did it by millions of trees sold,” said Loiterstein, who is on the task force.

However, the task force had difficulties sustaining contribution levels year after year. So the industry began searching for a more stable way to fund mar-



CHRISTIAN GOODEN/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
Marilee Sauer, of Crestwood, measures a live Christmas tree as she shops at Ted Drewes Christmas Tree lot on Chippewa in St. Louis, Missouri.

keting efforts.

In recent years, tree growers across the country began pursuing a mandatory fee, called a “check-off,” that’s used by other agricultural industries to help pay for promotional costs and research.

Check-offs are currently in place for about 20 other agricultural products or commodities, from blueberries to mangoes. The idea is that since these marketing effort help the entire industry, producers should pay.

The best known examples of producer-supported marketing efforts are the “Got Milk?” and “Beef: It’s What’s For Dinner” campaigns.

Last year, the United States Department of Agriculture published the proposed rules in the Federal Register, with the intent of eliciting public comments. The rule, as backed by the industry, would require growers or importers of 500 or more trees to pay as assessment of 15 cents per tree.

Supporters include the Missouri Christmas Tree Association, saying the industry needs a stable funding source.

“As an association we have supported the voluntary marketing efforts of the Christmas tree industry, but we cannot sustain the funding. This program would be a fair, consistent funding method so that all producers will benefit,” Teresa Meier, a tree grower and secretary of the association, wrote in a

public comment letter to the USDA in January.

By the time that the check-off’s public comment period ended earlier this year, more than 500 comments were made, and more than 80 percent supported the checkoff, according to the USDA.

But after the final rules were published on Nov. 8, they drew immediate criticism. Some politicians and bloggers were calling the check-off a tax that the White House was imposing on Christmas.

“It was the phrase ‘putting a tax on Christmas’ that did it,” Loiterstein said. “Everything was taken out of context, and it spread like wildfire.”

The next day, the USDA announced the program was delayed indefinitely.

Michael Jarvis, a USDA spokesman, said the program was delayed to answer the public’s questions about the fee.

“There are no tax dollars used to initiate, develop or implement the program,” Jarvis said. “There was a lot of misinformation out there that it was a sales tax. What we’re trying to do now is educate the public on this because there was a lot of confusion.”

Jarvis said he could provide no information on the check-off’s future. “The decision was made to delay the implementation, and we don’t have a time frame for when it will be implemented,”



CHRISTIAN GOODEN/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
Sam Shipp prepares to wrap a tree for a customer at Ted Drewes Christmas Tree lot on Chippewa in St. Louis, Missouri. As live Christmas tree sales have slumped in recent decades, the Christmas tree industry backed a 'tree fee' in November to help pay for marketing to sell more trees.

he said.

Tree growers and industry leaders supporting the check-off say the fee will raise about \$2 million annually to fund promotional expenses and research for live Christmas trees.

“Certainly the hope is that promotional efforts would increase demand for the product and the number of trees sold,” said Pam Helmsing, executive director of the National Christmas Tree Association.

Not everyone in the Christmas tree industry is in agreement over the proposed check-off, however.

Travis Dillon, general manager of St. Louis frozen-custard maker Ted Drewes, says the fee — which equals less than a half of one percent of the retail price for a typical tree — would further dampen tree sales.

Ted Drewes sells about 5,000 trees at its stores each season, continuing a tradition that dates back to the 1950s.

Even though the fee is would be imposed on many tree harvesters, not retailers, the result will lead to higher prices, Dillon says.

The mild weather in the weeks leading up to Christmas this year is contributing to strong sales, but historically, tree sales are on the decline.

“It’s been gradually going down each

year, either from the economy or from people buying artificial trees,” Dillon said. “Fifteen cents doesn’t sound like a lot, but I think it would bother a lot of people.”

That sentiment is shared by Eileen Meert, who owns Meert Tree Farm with her husband Domien. After 40 years in business, one of the couple’s six children will take over running the business next year. The Festus, Mo.-based business sells more than 500 Scotch, white pine, Norway Spruce trees a season and would be subject to the fee.

“We don’t make that much per tree as it is,” Meert said. “We’re trying to keep this industry alive, and anything detrimental like that wouldn’t help us.”

Still, even she is worried about the industry’s future. Her strategy, however, is to make tree-buying more of a social event.

At the Meert Tree Farm, customers are greeted with mugs of hot chocolate and a saw to trek through the grounds and cut down their tree, a bonding experience that Meert says is far superior to buying a fake tree in a box.

“We just had a family come by who said this is the only time they all had the chance to get together,” Meert said. “We’re losing this in America.”

Yankton Christmas Bird Count Completed

Thirty people from Yankton, Pickstown, Armour, Vermillion, & Sioux Fall, S.D.; Creighton, Neb.; and Sioux City, Iowa, completed the Audubon Christmas Bird Count in the Yankton circle on Sunday, Dec. 18.

A total of 71 species were observed on the count day and another five species were reported for count week for a total of 76 species for the week.

Audubon keeps records for the count day and a separate record for the three days either side of the count day. Birds seen the three days before and the three days after Dec. 18 but not on that date are listed as “Count Week” birds. This gives a better idea of what birds are in the area and doesn’t limit it to just the one day.

Unusual birds seen on this count and the number of times previously seen on the CBC included: Double-crested Cormorant, Thayer’s Gull, Northern Shoveler, & Blue-winged Teal — two times; Long-tailed Duck & Red-breasted Merganser — three times; Cackling Goose & Yellow-rumped Warbler — four times. The seven Long-tailed Ducks have been observed on Lewis and Clark Lake right above the dam since Nov. 15. They are an ocean duck rarely seen in the central United States as they usually are seen only along either the East Coast or West Coast.

The following is a compilation of the species and numbers of individual birds seen during the day’s count: Pied-billed Grebe — 1, Double-crested Cormorant — 2, Great Blue Heron — 1, Swan, unspecified species — 1, Canada Goose — 963, Cackling Goose — 40, Greater White-fronted Goose — 7, Snow Goose — 78, Wood duck — 14, Mallard — 5,597, Gadwall — 69, Northern Pintail — 5, Northern Shoveler — 8, Blue-winged Teal — 1, Green-winged Teal — 4, Ring-necked Duck — 2, Lesser Scaup — 12, Long-tailed duck — 7, Common Golden-eye — 61, Bufflehead — 1, Hooded Merganser — 2, Common Merganser — 688, Red-breasted Merganser — 3, Sharp-shinned Hawk — 1, Cooper’s Hawk — 2, Red-tailed Hawk — 50, Rough-legged Hawk — 5, Bald Eagle (adult) — 35, Bald Eagle (immature) — 48, Merlin — 2, American Kestrel — 8, Ring-necked Pheasant — 32, Wild Turkey — 143, American Coot — 33, Ring-billed Gull — 256, Thayer’s Gull — 2, Herring Gull — 39, Glaucous Gull — 2, Mourning Dove — 40, Eurasian-collared Dove — 121, Rock Pigeon — 341, Great Horned Owl — 3, Eastern Screech Owl — 3, Belted Kingfisher — 7, Red-headed Woodpecker — 6, Red-bellied Woodpecker — 13, Downy Woodpecker — 44, Hairy Woodpecker —

8, Northern Flicker (yellow-shafted) — 42, Northern Flicker (red-shafted) — 2, Northern Shrike — 5, Blue Jay — 75, American Crow — 536, Black-capped Chickadee — 85, White-breasted Nuthatch — 34, Brown Creeper — 10, Golden-crowned Kinglet — 7, Eastern Bluebird — 4, American Robin — 630, European Starling — 7,116, Cedar Waxwing — 29, Yellow-rumped Warbler — 4, Northern Cardinal — 29, American Tree Sparrow — 200, Dark-Eyed Junco — 343, Snow Bunting — 1, Western Meadowlark — 33, Brown-headed Cowbird — 4, Red-winged Blackbird — 78, Rusty Blackbird — 32, Common Grackle — 3, House Finch — 165, American Goldfinch — 168, & House Sparrow — 444.

The Count Week birds were: Canvasback — 3, Harris’s Sparrow — 2, Northern Harrier — 1, Pine Siskin — 3, & Wilson’s Snipe — 1.

The first count was held in Yankton in 1916 so Audubon has quite a database of information on the status of birds in this area. A few of the war years were missed but there is still a lot of data available for study. In the longest-running citizen science project in the nation the CBC gathers information about the winter distribution of various birds that is vital in monitoring the status of resident and migratory birds across the Western Hemisphere. The data, which are 100 percent volunteer generated, have become a crucial part of the U. S. government’s natural history monitoring database.

If you would like any additional information on the Christmas Bird Count all the data is available online at www.audubon.org. If you are interested in participating in the 2012 CBC next December email Roger Dietrich at rogerd@iw.net to be placed on the email list for the count.



AM 1450

MORNING COFFEE

WEEKDAYS MONDAY-FRIDAY

Friday, December 23

7:40 a.m. Yankton Press & Dakotan
(Nathan Johnson)

8:20 a.m. Riverrat Marathon
(Bruce Schild)

Have a Merry Christmas!

Available in the iTunes app store on December 13, 2011.



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