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Grand Forks Herald

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2019

Crystal Sugar looks beyond this year's 'bump in the road'



Mikkel Pates / Forum News Service
Tom Astrup, president and chief executive officer of American Crystal Sugar Co., presided over an annual meeting Thur., Dec. 5.

By Mikkel Pates
Forum News Service

FARGO — As a grower for American Crystal Sugar Co. and chairman of the co-op's board, Curt Knutson tried to look for a bright side to a miserable year. "The optimist says this is just a bump in the road of our history," Knutson told American Crystal Sugar Co. shareholders gathered Thursday, Dec. 5, for an annual meeting after a harvest that is unmatched in difficulty because of a wet fall and untimely snow and freezes.

Tom Astrup, president and chief executive officer, spoke to a glum crowd of more than 800 at the Fargo Holiday Inn. The company's payout is cut by 60% in payments — the result of a smaller payment on a much smaller crop. Astrup acknowledged that "everybody" would lose money on beets this year, during a time when other crops, including potatoes, suffered as well. About 115,000 acres, or about a third, were left in the field, often with large yields of up to

35 tons per acre. Knutson of Fisher, Minn., said farmers suffered an "unruly harvest" that left a third of the crop in the field. "Sometimes we have to bear the brunt of a bad year," Knutson said, but he said the board had tried to do the right things to treat shareholders equitably. Knutson stepped down after the meeting after serving his maximum terms on the board. Ronald Brownstein, senior political analyst for CNN and senior editor of The Atlantic

magazine, was a guest speaker and didn't sugar-coat the political landscape. Brownstein described a "partitioning of the country" between blue and red, and joked that the American Crystal logo includes blue and red concentric circles that don't touch. He said that no matter how the 2020 presidential election turns out, 49% of the country will feel under siege from the other. "I wonder if we're heading

SUGAR: Page A5

Small Business Saturday hit or miss in Grand Forks



Adam Kurtz / Grand Forks Herald
Chad Gunderson, owner of Half Brothers brewing company, 17 N. Third St., said weather was a factor that kept customers away from Small Business Saturday, Nov. 30.

By Adam Kurtz
Grand Forks Herald

Small Business Saturday, on Nov. 30, was a big hit across the nation, but locally owned shops in Grand Forks are reporting mixed results for the day, with the weather being a factor.

American Express and the National Federation of Independent Businesses commissioned a survey which found that, across the nation, Americans spent a reported \$19.6 billion at independent retailers and restaurants that day — a record high. The 2019 Small Business Saturday Consumer Insights Survey also found that 110 million shoppers took part in the Shop Small campaign, up from the previous year. The shopping event, created by American Express and now in its 10th year, has seen shoppers spend around \$120 billion in only 10 days. "It was good, so I had a lot of customers in," said Kay Derry, owner of Northern Roots Boutique, 2550 South Columbia Road, Suite H. "A lot of return customers, but there were also

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UND POLICE OFFICER HONORED for saving suicidal victim

Local sergeant carries a medical kit he purchased himself



Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald
UND police officer Michael Pommerer, right, accepts a lifesaving award from UND police chief Eric Plummer during a ceremony Thursday, Dec. 5, at UND.

By Hannah Shirley
Grand Forks Herald

The way Michael Pommerer sees it, he was just doing what he had trained to do. "It was kind of an average night," said Pommerer, a UND police sergeant. "I just kind of happened to be at the right

place at the right time with the right equipment." UND Police Chief Eric Plummer honored Pommerer with a Lifesaving Award in a ceremony Thursday, Dec. 5, at the UND Tech Accelerator for his actions, which saved a Grand Forks resident's life last month.

Plummer said that Pommerer's actions the night of Nov. 1 went above and beyond his regular dedication to the campus community. "This was not on campus; this was adjacent to campus," Plummer said. "He heard the dispatch and immediately said, 'I can be the first one over

there. I can help.'" Around 9 p.m. Nov. 1, Pommerer was on his regular patrol on campus when the Grand Forks Police Department put out a dispatch about a suicidal person near campus, Plummer said. Realizing he

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Thief River Falls Airport Board backs Denver Air Connection

By Adam Kurtz
Grand Forks Herald

The Thief River Falls Airport Board is backing Denver Air Connection over Boutique Air, the current provider for its Essential Air Service route to Minneapolis. However, the U.S. Department of Transportation has the final say. The Airport Board deliberated for nearly two hours during the morning of Wednesday, Dec. 4, before choosing to back Denver Air Connection. The airline, a subsidiary of Key Lime Air, operates out of Denver International Airport with service to destinations in Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming. The aircraft that would provide the service between Thief River Falls and Minneapolis, should the airline be selected by the DOT,

would either be a 50-seat Embraer EMB-145 or a 30-seat Dornier 328 Jet, a large step up from Boutique's eight seats on a Pilatus PC 12. The reliability of Denver Air Connection, at a rate of 99.6%, was one of the deciding factors in the board's decision, as well as the capacity of the jet. That capacity has the potential to increase enplanements, which could trigger more federal dollars for the airport. "They have enough seats on the plane that, if the service is reliable and successful, we could get to primary entitlement status, which means that the airport, at 10,000 enplanements, would receive \$1 million per year in federal entitlement

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UND analyst: Economy will feel effect of 2019 crop losses

By Ann Bailey
Grand Forks Herald

The ripple effect of what likely will be multi-billion-dollar crop losses will be felt in many sectors of the Grand Forks region economy, experts say.

A historically wet fall resulted in fields too muddy to harvest; as a result, tens of thousands of acres of grain and row crops were abandoned in northeast North Dakota and northwest Minnesota. Meanwhile, freezing temperatures destroyed more than a combined 100,000 acres of sugar beets and potatoes in the Red River Valley.

The combination of the loss of both sugar beets and potatoes will be an especially hard hit, said Donavon Johnson, Northern Plains Potato Growers president.

"When you have two crops in the same year struggling, that's when you have trickle-down," Johnson said. "It's a trickle-down effect that will happen in rural areas, whether it's restaurants, vehicles, equipment. I had a trucker who came in ...

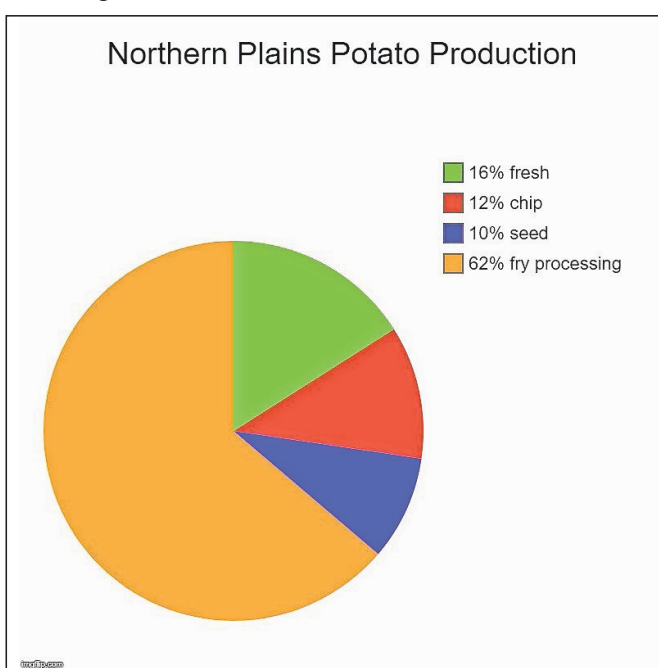
He said 'I haul potatoes. I don't have any to haul.'"

Meanwhile, some wash plant workers and packers in the potato industry are seeing their hours cut because their employers have reduced the number of days they're doing business, said Ted Kreis, Northern Plains Potato Growers marketing director.

Besides obvious sectors, such as transportation and labor, the food industry, local banks, power companies and hospitals also will feel the effects of a reduction in farm revenue, said David Flynn, chair of UND's Department of Economics and Finance.

The Red River Valley sugar beet crop was another major crop hit hard by freeze damage. Nearly 118,000 of the 390,000 acres of sugar beets American Crystal Sugar Co.'s shareholders planted this spring were destroyed in early November when temperatures dropped into the teens.

Sugar beet farmers in Minnesota and North Dakota left 3.5 million tons, or 34%, of their crop



Graphic by Kimberly Wynn / Grand Forks Herald
Northern Plains potato production will be challenged this year as many acres remain unharvested. Here is what happens to a potato in this region once collected from the fields. Source: Northern Plains Potato Growers Association.

in the field this fall. Last month, sugar beet farmers said they will be paid \$37 per ton for the crop, which is about \$14 per ton less than the 2019 payment. Not only will they be paid less, but some sugar beet farmers also will have to

pay back American Crystal Sugar Co. \$343 for each acre they couldn't harvest.

The economy of Grand Forks and other cities and towns likely will feel the effect of sugar beet farmers' revenue reduction.

"For (each) million-dol-

lar loss in sugar beets in the local economy, you're talking about something like a million and a half loss overall," Flynn said.

Many North Dakota wheat farmers also have taken a financial hit as a result of wet weather that damaged crop quality and resulted in abandoned acres. Nearly 1 million of the 7.5 million hard red spring wheat acres North Dakota farmers planted this spring were not harvested, the North Dakota Wheat Commission said. Total North Dakota 2019 spring wheat production was 291.5 million bushels, 26.5 million bushels fewer than 2018 production.

Between discounts for quality and for falling numbers, revenue loss to North Dakota wheat farmers could amount to more than \$150 million, said Jim Peterson, North Dakota Wheat Commission marketing director.

The wet fall also took a toll on dry, edible beans. Tens of thousands of North Dakota dry edible bean acres were damaged or destroyed by heavy

rains, snow and flooding this fall. In Grand Forks County alone, 42,565 acres were damaged and 28,377 of the acres were destroyed as of Nov. 1, according to the Oct. 31 North Dakota Emergency Board Damage report.

Nelson, Ramsey, Steele, Traill, Walsh and Ramsey counties, meanwhile, had combined losses totaling nearly \$27 million, the report said. Cavalier County's corn crop also had a \$1.8 million loss.

The damage report included only per-county crop losses that exceeded 30%. Some of the counties had multiple crop losses that were less than 30%, so they weren't recorded.

So far, of course, estimates of the economic impact of the loss of farm revenue are preliminary. The full effect won't be known until farmers learn how much of their losses will be covered by crop insurance and how much federal disaster aid they might receive.

What is clear now is that 2020, at best, is shaping up to be another challenging year for farmers.

DENVER

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money," said Joe Hedrick, the airport's manager.

Thief River Falls Regional Airport's current entitlement, called a "non primary entitlement" is \$150,000 per year, according to Hedrick. Enplanements at the airport were at 4,805 in 2018, down from 5,735 two years ago.

Denver Air Connection's bid states that the average fair for a one-way trip to Minneapolis would be \$99, an increase from Boutique which has offered fares as low as \$59. Denver Air has proposed 12 weekly round trip flights.

In addition to its reliability rate, Denver Air Connection says its flights are on time 94.1% of the time. This goes in contrast to Boutique Air, which has held the route since 2016.

"Year one with them, they absolutely knocked it out of the park," Hedrick said. "But since that time, they've kind of been floun-



Submitted photo

The Embraer EMB-145, a 50-seat jet, is one of the aircraft Denver Air Connection is proposing to use at Thief River Falls Regional Airport.

dering on their reliability, and the past year has been hovering at 90%."

Hedrick will draft a letter to the DOT stating the board's support for Denver Air Connection, the next step in the process. The DOT has the final say on whether or not it will select the airline. Hedrick said the letter will be submitted by Dec. 13, and the order selecting the airline should be published about 30 days after receiving the letter.

One area of concern for

Denver Air Connection could be the price of its bid. At nearly \$4 million, it was the highest of the four airlines bidding for the route. Boutique Air's bid came in at \$3.6 million, in the middle of the pack.

"I have seen (DOT) go against the community,

but it is rare," Hedrick said. "That's the best way I can put it."

President and CEO of Key Lime Air and Denver Air Connection Cliff Honeycutt seemed assured the price of the bid would not affect the final outcome.

"While our proposal is

slightly more expensive out of the box, it clearly has the most potential to increase Thief Rivers' confidence and trust in their daily air service," he wrote to the Herald in an email. "This will eventually translate into increased ridership, which

will ultimately lower the subsidy requirement as the capacity isn't limited by a reduced number of seats We are confident that the Department of Transportation will recognize this and support Thief River's recommendation."

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