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Tree-Mendous Task

By: JON HALBERG, Gazette Staff Writer January 02, 2002

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Growers already working on next crop of

The work doesn't stop just because the holidays are over. The next task for evergreen growers: clearing fields of debris, as illustrated by J.D. Fleming, co-owner of Fleming's Christmas Tree Farm in Indiana. (Gazette photo by Jamie Isenberg)

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This past week, after a strong holiday season, many area Christmas-tree growers took a deep breath and a couple days off.

But though their sales may be seasonal, the work involved in running a Christmas-tree farm is anything but. Ask J.D. Fleming, co-owner of Fleming's Christmas Tree Farm in Indiana.

"Well, basically, we let our employees have last week off," Fleming said. "But weather permitting, we'll start cleaning up the fields this week."

According to Fleming, after 10 weeks of working seven days a week during their busiest time of year, his workers needed a breather. But he has a list for them when they return this week.

"Clearing brush, clearing stumps, cutting the culls away" are some of the jobs ahead, said Fleming. He explained that culls are the trees that didn't make the grade and were left behind in the field.

"If the weather stays fit, we'll get on it."

However, if the weather doesn't stay fit, Fleming said, there's plenty of equipment maintenance to catch up on before spring planting begins in a few months.

Other area growers also took a break between Christmas and New Year's Day after the harvesting push that led up to the holidays.

"The crews just finished some long shifts," said Jim Carino at Carino Nurseries in Strongstown.

"This year the weather cooperated," he added. "It was the

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best season I've seen in 40 years, as far as weather goes."

But while unseasonably warm temperatures and snow-free fields made harvesting easier, they also made it a challenge to keep the trees healthy looking and green after they were cut, said Chuck Flinn, forester at Musser Forests Inc.

"It was easy as far as getting in and out of the fields," Flinn said. "But we struggled, as a lot of growers did, trying to keep the trees fresh."

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What should be done with the Pledge of Allegiance

and the phrase "under God?"
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- Leave it as it is
- Remove the phrase, but keep the pledge
- Leave the phrase in, but make the pledge optional
- If the phrase remains, remove the pledge from public schools

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Flinn explained that warm temperatures and sunny skies are a tree grower's enemy once the trees have been cut.

Instead of being preserved by chill air and clouds, as happens in usual holiday seasons, the recent warm spell

meant growers needed to use straw for cover and sprinkler systems for moisture to keep the trees in good shape this year.

Flinn said there'll be plenty of work for his crews in the new year, regardless of the weather outside. In addition to Christmas trees, they'll keep busy working with other kinds of vegetation in Musser's greenhouses.

Tree farmers with big operations have acres of land needing to be made ready for new tree crops after the season's sizeable harvest.

Plans at Musser Forests include using heavy equipment to shred the stumps, boughs and other tree leftovers still in harvested fields after the first of the year.

"We'll be getting busy cleaning up the fields and making plans for the coming year," said Flinn. "It all depends on the weather now."

All year-round, weather is an important factor for tree farmers. From planting, through growing, to harvesting, the weather can always play havoc with the tree crop.

"We had a drought in '88 - actually there were a few drought years there," Fleming said. "But we didn't feel the effects until 1996" when it was time to harvest the trees hit by the drought when they were young.

Adding to the weather hazard is the hazard from all kinds of pests, from weeds to insects to those with four legs, Fleming said.

"I had a field where I planted 22,000 trees - I was so proud of that field," Fleming said. "In 1989, the deer ate 21,000 of them - all the trees that made it through the drought the year before got eaten by the deer."

And there can also be losses from pests with two legs - people who want to get their Christmas trees free - Fleming said.

"We've had it happen many times - we get the trees cut and baled and come back for a second load and all the trees are gone," Fleming said.

This year, Fleming said, at least three county growers have mentioned that they'd been hit by tree thieves, though he hadn't had any problems this year at his farm.

.Just about now 'tis the season for year-end homework



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just about now, as the season for year-end accounting, according to Fleming.

"These next couple weeks, we'll be evaluating what kind of a year we've had," Fleming said.

Tentatively, he said, this past season looks as if it was a good one on the wholesale end of the business and average for retail sales. About 90 percent of Fleming's Christmas-tree business is wholesale, he said.

He attributed the "average" retail sales to the high number of trees for sale in this area.

Flinn said the past season was healthy for Musser Forests sales as well.

Musser trees are all sold wholesale to retailers up and down the East Coast, he said, with the bulk going to New Jersey, New York and the Washington, D.C., area.

"We sold 25 to 30 percent more than last year," Flinn said. "We ran out of Fraser firs three weeks before Christmas. That's the first time it's happened."

For management at area tree farms, the next few months are filled with East Coast events where they can peddle their wares.

The State Farm Show in Harrisburg and upcoming trade shows in Columbus, Ohio, and Baltimore will give them a look at the market and a chance to buy and sell for the coming year.

"At Musser Forests, we've got a lot of Christmas-tree seedlings and transplants to sell," Flinn said. "We'll be taking some samples to the trade shows so people can buy what they want for their spring needs."

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