

# Blue Bird begins to rebuild fire-ravaged facility

by Mike Irwin | Nov. 28, 2015, 1:54 p.m.

Business, fires, Public Safety



World photo/Don Seabrook

Workers pour concrete Wednesday at Blue Bird Inc.'s Wenatchee facility, damaged in the Sleepy Hollow Fire last summer.

**WENATCHEE** — As promised, Blue Bird Inc. is rising from the ashes.

The fruit company, one of the largest in central Washington, has begun replacing \$30 million in buildings and equipment damaged or destroyed at its Wenatchee facility in last summer's Sleepy Hollow Fire.

Executives had said the company would rebuild on its present site despite the city of Wenatchee's hopes for other types of development on the property.

Last week, Blue Bird contract construction crews began pouring concrete footings at the site.

On June 28, the Sleepy Hollow Fire destroyed 30 homes in northwest Wenatchee and sent embers flying more than a mile to ignite industrial properties between North Wenatchee and Walla Walla avenues. Damaged were facilities at Blue Bird, 1470 Walla Walla Ave., along with Northwest Wholesale, Inc., Michelsen Packaging Company, and Stemilt Growers. Total damage estimates from company execs and fire officials have ranged from \$60 to \$100 million.

Blue Bird, based in Peshastin, was the first to reveal its rebuilding plans; other businesses affected by the fire are still working with insurance companies to assess how to move forward.

In the fire, Blue Bird lost millions of dollars in buildings, equipment and product — including tons of cherries and organic Red Delicious apples and a new \$8 million electronic cherry-sorting line that began

operating just 30 days before the blaze.

At the time, General Manager Ron Gonsalves pointed out that more than 100,000 square feet of controlled-atmosphere storage, bin storage rooms and fruit-packing facilities escaped the fire with only minor damage. In all, the remaining buildings are valued at around \$15 million, he said, “and rebuilding elsewhere would require rebuilding these facilities at the new site.”

Wenatchee City Council members took a look at fire-damaged sites earlier this month as part of a presentation on the possibilities of redeveloping a nearby 7.5-acre parcel owned by the state Department of Transportation. That property at 1551 N. Wenatchee Ave. is scheduled to be vacated and available sometime in 2017.

Blue Bird’s Wenatchee operation has an annual payroll of more than \$4.5 million, said Gonsalves, with crews sorting, packing and shipping more than \$60 million in fruit each year.

---

*Reach Mike Irwin at 509-665-1179 or [irwin@wenatcheeworld.com](mailto:irwin@wenatcheeworld.com). Read his blog [Everyday Business](#). follow him on Twitter at [@MikelrwinWW](#).*