



Christmas trees a growing business

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David Mace VERMONT PRESS BUREAU MONTPELIER — As agricultural professions go, Christmas tree growers have one of the trickiest growing cycles of any farmer in Vermont. It can take as long as eight years for a tree to mature to commercial size. Yet the selling season lasts only a few weeks. And on Dec. 25, any leftover product is virtually worthless. But that doesn't discourage the roughly 250 Vermonters who grow Christmas trees in the Green Mountain State, either as a way to make a few extra bucks or as their primary source of income. "We produce approximately a million trees in Vermont each year," said Ronald Fisher, agriculture marketing specialist with the Vermont Department of Agriculture. "We have 225 to 250 growers in the state, and they range from a small person who does it as a quasi-hobby and sells 75 trees to large wholesale growers who sell several thousand a year." He estimated that Vermont's Christmas tree crop is worth between \$12 million and \$15 million annually. But that represents only a fraction of the nationwide market. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, an industry group, a 2001 survey indicated that roughly 28 million households had real Christmas trees, compared to about 60 million households that displayed an artificial tree. Sales numbers are estimated from pre- and post-Christmas surveys, said Jim Corliss, owner of Piper Mountain Christmas Trees in Newburgh, Maine, and president of the National Christmas Tree Association. Corliss, who grew up in Richford and Berkshire, said consumer surveys are also used to estimate the average retail price paid, which was \$31.09 last year, making the total sales volume for 2001 approximately \$870 million. While the sales numbers have been falling

since a peak of 35.3 million trees sold in the U.S. in 1999, Corliss said a pre-season poll showing an upswing in the number of people who say they intend to get a real tree has given growers optimism for a good season. There are 1,700 growers, wholesalers, and other affiliated members, and virtually every state produces some Christmas trees, except for the desert Southwest, he said. "There's actually enough growers in Florida to have their own state association," Corliss said in a phone interview from Washington, D.C. "Texas, too." Corliss was in the nation's capital for the delivery of the White House Christmas tree, an 18-foot Noble fir from Washington state. At the association's convention — held every two years — a contest determines the next two White House trees. Two trends in the industry are increasing numbers of people who go to a grower to select a tree and Internet sales. "More and more people, seemingly, are going out to the farm to get one," Corliss said. James Horst of Bennington is the director the New Hampshire-Vermont Christmas Tree Association. Its roughly 250 members — representing about two-thirds of the growers in the two states — also includes some distributors and accessory suppliers. Eighty percent are growers. Like Fisher, he said the range of growers varies widely. "But it tends to be on the small side usually," Horst said. "There are very few growers in the two states who make a living just growing trees." He said most Vermont growers cultivate predominantly balsam fir — prized for its scent as well as its needle retention — although during the last 10 years, there's been an increasing interest and demand for Fraser fir. "The balsam fir are native to the area, although Fraser fir are genetically kissing cousins," Horst said. The state's climate and soil conditions are excellent for balsam fir, and Fraser fir can thrive in many — but not all — areas of Vermont. "They're more sensitive to heavy clay soils that hold moisture," he said. "And if you plant them in the wrong site, they're not very forgiving." It takes roughly eight to 10 years for a tree to mature after it's planted, so farmers must always plant a new crop each year to replace those being harvested. For Horst, who has 50,000 to 60,000 trees in the ground and sells roughly 4,000 annually, that means planting 5,000 to 6,000 trees — roughly 1,000 per acre — each year. "For every tree you plant, you don't harvest one," he said. "There's always insects and disease problems, you plant some where soil conditions aren't right, the deer eat some. It's like any crop, you don't have a perfect harvest." Spring and summer are spent mowing between rows of trees, fertilizing and shearing them to properly shape the trees. It is also the time to watch

for any pests, and apply insecticides or herbicides. In the mid- to late summer growers start lining up sales and by September it's time to grade and mark trees, generally with colored ribbons denoting premium, number one, number two and culls. The Thanksgiving weekend starts the selling season, which lasts until Christmas. Both Horst and Fisher said the growing trend in Vermont is growers who have the customers come directly to them, pick their tree and harvest it themselves. "The choose-and-cut industry is one that develops very loyal customers," Fisher said. "If people have a good experience at the farm their first year, they tend to come back year after year." Such growers may provide other attractions, including sleigh rides, farm animals to pet, hot cider or hot chocolate or even gift shops. "It's a way for the farmer to increase his share of the retail dollar by selling direct to the consumer," Fisher said. "It then doesn't become a ride around the neighborhood, looking for who'll sell a tree for a dollar less ... I say to people 'You're selling the memory, give them the tree,' and I think that's very true." That's what Dr. Robert Murray of Waterbury Center does at Murray Hill Farm. A family physician by trade, he used an inheritance to purchase about 35 acres of land in the 1970s and was trying to decide how he could generate some income from it. "I went to the Ag Department and said 'What can I do with the land?' And they said Christmas trees or small berries," Murray said. "And small berries are very labor intensive." He quickly found out that the trees, while easier than berries, don't care for themselves. "Really what it is, is a hobby," said Murray, who does most of the work himself. "I put in countless hours and I just about break even. Of course, when I retire I plan to make some money off it." He started in planting trees in 1976 and about eight years later began inviting the public to come and cut their own trees while enjoying other amenities. "That's the whole thing," Murray said. "You take the kids on the tractor rides, you provide hot cocoa and cider. Most of our customers are repeats, they've been coming year after year." He'll sell about 500 trees a year, plus some wreaths, garland and Christmas tree stands. But Murray figures he plants up to 2,000 trees a year — a mix of balsam and Fraser fir, white pine and Colorado blue spruce — to keep up his stock. Every few years, when he has a glut, he'll sell some to another retailer. "I'm not in it to make money," he said. "It looks impressive to see the trees, but then when you try to sell them it ain't so easy. It's like 'If you build it they will come.' Well, not really. You have to market, and that's not my bag." On the other end of the spectrum are large operations like

Johnson Christmas Tree Farm, a family-run business in Concord. Alan Johnson, 40, is a third-generation grower who runs the farm with his wife and their four children. His father and grandfather — both John Johnson — ran a general farm and supplemented their income with pasture trees taken from the farm. “I was the little boy raking up the needles and getting it in my blood,” he said. The family has about 30,000 trees planted at their Concord farm, but that’s only a fraction of their total crop. They lease land at a half-dozen sites around the Northeast Kingdom, including a choose-and-cut farm in Norwich, and hope to sell about 10,000 trees this season. Johnson and other large growers use mechanical planters and balers that tightly wrap cut trees with twine to save on labor costs. Trees are generally sold by the truckload, 500 to 800 per load depending on size and quality, but Johnson will sell in lots as small as 25 trees. “I think our average customer is from an Agway store to a mom-and-pop place that wants to sell 150, 200 trees,” he said. “We sell to mini-marts that want to sell 40 or 50 trees. We’re even sending a small box to Bermuda this year.” The Internet has helped buyers find him, but Johnson doesn’t sell directly through the Web, instead selling to a vendor who handles mail order buyers. Fisher said modern Christmas tree farming started 20 years ago as farmers realized that taking trees from the wild was inefficient and moved toward what he called “plantation” farms. “As the buying public began to move away from what has been called the ‘Charlie Brown’ Christmas tree to the perfect specimen, that market blossomed and as the farmers have learned marketing they’ve helped push that trend even further,” he said. Fisher said that while the number of growers has stayed fairly constant over the last decade — the faces have changed as a new generation has taken over, he noted — the number of old style “vacant lot” retailers, with their familiar rows of lights, has dwindled. But the increase of choose-and-cut lots has turned trees into a tourist item. Fisher said the experience of picking a tree has made Vermont a popular destination for out-of-state tourists or second homeowners. “We work with the Vermont Bed and Breakfast Association, the Chamber of Commerce,” he said. “Many of the B&Bs present holiday vacation packages where people come up and spend a weekend, and then they give the visitor a tree or wreath they can take back with them.” The trend has grown in last five years or so, helping bring in lodgers between hunting and ski seasons. The state chips in a small amount to help the industry. Fisher said that last year Christmas tree growers got about \$25,000 from various state

sources to support the Vermont-New Hampshire Christmas Tree Association and marketing the wholesale industry. For example, 250 trees were donated last year to fire stations in New York City after Sept. 11. And the state is helping Vermont growers like Johnson ship about 2,500 trees to Bermuda this year by assisting with such things as inspecting the trees for pests. Horst said the idea that tree farming is easy is a myth. "You don't plant a Christmas tree and come back in 10 years and harvest it," he said. "You won't get much if you do."