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Slowdown at U.S. port of Tacoma threatens Christmas tree shipments to Asia

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By Victoria Cavaliere

SEATTLE (Reuters) - A slowdown at a busy Washington state port amid a labor dispute could mean that thousands of Christmas trees grown in the Pacific Northwest will not be shipped in time to meet holiday demand in Asia, industry officials said on Monday.

Some 8 million to 10 million evergreen trees grown in Washington state and Oregon are sold as Christmas trees each year, many destined for markets in Asia, Canada and Mexico, said Bryan Ostlund, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association.

Trees that should have already left the Port of Tacoma for cities like Hong Kong and Tokyo have been languishing in shipping containers for about two weeks, he said. The ocean voyage from Washington state to Asia takes about 23 days.

"Trees are a perishable commodity, so the clock is ticking," Ostlund said, adding Tacoma was the primary port for tree shipments. "If they get there too late for the selling season, now what do you do with them?" he said.

Asian orders for more than 12,000 trees, already cut and ready for shipment, have been canceled so far because of the delays, and just as many trees are estimated to be backlogged at the terminal, according to the Agriculture Transportation Coalition.

The Port of Tacoma, the sixth largest container port in North America, said it had seen a 60 percent slowdown since the end of October during contract talks between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the Pacific Maritime Association, which represents multinational ocean carriers.

The maritime association has blamed the union for the Tacoma slowdown as well as for slowing operations at Los Angeles and Long Beach, the country's busiest shipping complex.

A union representative could not immediately be reached for comment on Monday. The union has denied causing the slowdown, which has affected shipments of perishable items including apples, potatoes and now Christmas trees.

"We have about 2,200 total trees that should have left for Hong Kong about two weeks ago," said Washington state farmer John Tillman, adding he feared the inventory, which takes seven to nine years to grow, would end up tossed "in the harbor."

"It's really disappointing. A lot of people, small farmers and businesses, their livelihood depends on being able to export American goods overseas," he said.

(Reporting by Victoria Cavaliere; Editing by Cynthia Johnston and [Peter Cooney](#))



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