

Open House! Several Robert Lee businesses and offices participated in the annual Christmas Open House event on Friday, December 2. Pictured clockwise from top left during their respective open house events are Robert Lee State Bank, Coke County Courthouse, Coke County Feed & Ranch Supply, and the City of Robert Lee.



...Christmas Trees

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Dan Schaefer, who operates Lee County Christmas Trees with his wife, Susan, said traffic at his six-acre tree farm increased 40 percent last year and has been steady so far this holiday season.



"We think this year will be about like last year," said Schaefer, who expects to sell 250 to 300 trees this season.

Reed said the impact from this year's drought was concentrated mostly on seedlings. This year's crop of mature Christmas trees was spared major effects, he said, though some trees might not have reached the usual height.

Schaefer said he raised tree prices by \$5 a foot last year, but he didn't see a need for another increase this year, a trend Reed said is consistent across the industry.

"Prices of pre-cut trees that came from out-of-state probably went up because of transportation costs," Reed said. "But choose-and-cut trees didn't go up in price this year."

Consumers could expect to see price increases next year because of the rising cost of fertilizer, Reed said.

Fred Raley, Texas A&M Forest Service Tree Improvement Coordinator and Director of the Western Gulf Tree Improvement Program, said the most popular Christmas tree species in Texas is Virginia pine because it grows well throughout the state.

But other species have been gaining attention.

"Afghan pines grow well in Central Texas, and that's the area from where most of the increased consumer interest has come," he said.

Raley said the Tree Improvement Program is working to find additional species that grow well across the state to provide consumers more options when selecting live Christmas trees.

"For many families, there is nothing like choosing your own tree and having the smell and feel of a live Christmas tree," Raley said. "It's part of a Rockwellian view of a family Christmas that many people seem to be wanting to continue or recapture."

And that, in turn, benefits the state economy.

In 2020, the Christmas tree industry generated more than \$800 million and supported nearly 7,000 jobs with a payroll of \$260 million, according to a Texas A&M Forest Service study.

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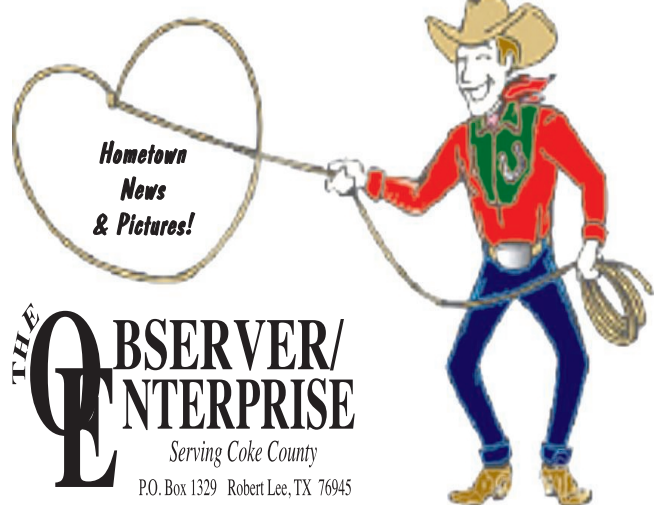
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