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Drought hastens decline of Valencia orange production

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Several varieties of California oranges are bagged for purchase. A trend of declining valencia orange production since 2000 is being accelerated by the drought.

Valencia acreage has seen a precipitous decline in recent years; there are about 34,000 bearing acres this year, down from 65,000 in 2001-02, according to NASS.

While warm winter afternoons have contributed to the light fruit set, growers have been mostly spared the night time freezes that have affected their orchards in recent years. San Joaquin Valley citrus growers lost about \$441 million in revenue last year because of a freeze in December 2013, as about 30 percent of navel oranges and 40 percent of remaining mandarins were rendered unsuitable for fresh markets, Citrus Mutual estimated.

Growers are about halfway through their harvest of what is expected to be about a 78 million-carton navel crop, Blakely said. Fruit started out smaller than normal because of drought stress on trees throughout the prime citrus region of Fresno, Kings and Tulare counties, but winter rains improved fruit sizes, Blakely said.

Utilization rates — the fruit that's packed as fresh and not diverted to juice — have remained above 80 percent, he said.

SACRAMENTO — A trend of declining Valencia orange production that's been ongoing since 2000 is accelerating because of the drought, according to government and industry data.

Growers this season are expected to produce a 20-million-carton crop, down from 22 million cartons last year and a little more than half the 39 million cartons produced in 2001-02, reports the National Agricultural Statistics Service office.

A sampling of 539 groves found an average fruit set of 545, well below the five-year average of 639 and the lowest set since the 2008-2009 season, according to NASS. The average March 1 diameter was 2.571 inches, slightly above the five-year average of 2.562, the agency found.

The dry conditions and a shutoff of federal water have hastened growers' decision to take out Valencia trees, which were already being replaced with navels and other more lucrative citrus varieties before the drought began.

"There were probably a few more pushed out last year than what might have been ordinarily," said Bob Blakely, vice president of the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual. "I think the lighter fruit set has more to do with the drought and heat as well."

The NASS objective measurement report comes as the season's first Valencias are being packed for export. It's a bit of an early start for Valencia harvest, which typically occurs in the spring and summer.

Smaller crop makes for better flavor, vintners say

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SACRAMENTO — Wine producers in California saw a 12 percent drop in tonnage during the most recent grape crush, but the industry is far from concerned.

After three straight years of record-high crushes from 2011-13, there's still plenty of wine in inventories to sell, Gladys Horiuchi, spokeswoman for the San Francisco-based Wine Institute, said. And vintners say the smaller yield brought a more intense flavor that made 2014 a fine vintage year.

"Because of the drought, with less water you get lower yields per acre and higher quality grapes with more intensely flavored character," Horiuchi said.

The 2014 crush totaled 4.14 million tons, down 12 percent from the record-high 2013 crush of 4.7 million tons, according to the final report issued by the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service office here.

Red wine varieties — the largest share of grapes crushed — came in at a little more than 2.1 million tons, a 12 percent drop from 2013. The crushing of white wine



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

California wines are arranged on a market shelf in Redding, Calif. Though the 2014 grape crush was 12 percent smaller in tonnage than the record 2013 crop, vintners say there's plenty of wine to sell and the quality is good.

grapes totaled 1.75 million tons, down 4 percent from the previous year, NASS reported.

The lower yields appeared to push up prices, as the average price per ton for all varieties in 2014 was \$743, up 4 percent from 2013, the agency observed. Red wine grapes brought the most value at \$892, up 5 percent from the previous sea-

son, while white wine grapes valued at just under \$596, down 4 percent, according to NASS.

While the greater Fresno area had the largest share of the state's crush at more than 1.33 million tons, grapes produced in Napa County received the highest average price of \$4,077 per ton, a 10 percent jump from 2013, NASS reported.

In 2014, Chardonnay accounted for the largest percentage of the total crush volume at 17.3 percent, with Cabernet Sauvignon second at 12.3 percent. Cabernet Sauvignon was the priciest wine grape last year at \$1,426 per ton, up 6 percent from 2013, while the 2014 Chardonnay price of nearly \$861 was down 1 percent from 2013, according to NASS.

Drought-stricken California ramps up water restrictions

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California residents have to turn off their sprinklers, and restaurants won't give customers water unless they ask under new drought regulations approved Tuesday.

The State Water Resources Control Board has extended and expanded restrictions on water use with California entering its fourth year of drought as winter ends without significant storms or snowfall to replenish dwindling reservoirs.

The drought's effects are rippling across the state. So far this winter, wildfires are burn-

ing through nearly four times as many acres as usual. The state firefighting agency reports that the dry conditions are forcing it to maintain its highest-ever level of seasonal firefighters straight through the winter.

The state water board, meanwhile, is pursuing ways to cut down urban water use. It voted to extend statewide outdoor water limits imposed in July, barring washing down driveways, decorative fountains without recirculating pumps and sprinklers that spray pavement.

New rules will require local

water departments to restrict the number of days residents can water their lawns. If they don't, residents must follow a state rule limiting their sprinkling to twice a week. Homeowners are also barred from using sprinklers on days when it rains and for the next two days after.

Golf course owners objected to limiting days they can water grass, telling the board Tuesday that the regulation would threaten their ability to keep attractive landscapes, which they say are already water-efficient.

The regulations also mandate common business conservation

practices statewide. Restaurants can't offer water unless customers ask, and hotels and motels must offer guests an opportunity to decline fresh towels and sheets at hotels.

It's up to local water departments to enforce these rules, which are expected to take effect later this month. They can fine offenders \$500 per violation, but few have gone that far.

The water board also decided Tuesday it will start tracking how agencies enforce the regulations, including the number of citations and warning letters issued.

Online

NASS Valencia Orange Objective Measurement Report: http://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/California/Publications/Fruits_and_Nuts/201503valom.pdf

California Citrus Mutual: <http://www.cacitrusmutual.com>



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