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California

Warm weather, smaller fruit stifle prune tonnage

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

RED BLUFF, Calif. — The warm early-spring weather in California this year may cause prune tonnage to be slightly below last year, a survey of growers has determined.

In all, 100,000 tons of prunes, or dried plums, are expected to come out of dryers this summer and fall, down 4 percent from the 104,000 tons produced in 2014, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service in Sacramento.

While the plum set appears to be good, the warm and early spring may increase the amount of smaller fruit, NASS reasoned.

Northern areas may fare better. Grower Tyler Christensen notices a heavy fruit set in his plum orchards near Red Bluff, as down crops in 2013 and 2014 may have given the trees enough rest to produce in abundance this year, he said.

"We had a pretty warm winter and a warm spring, so they came out of dormancy pretty early," Christensen said. "But all the farm advisers are assuring us that we had much better chilling



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

California prunes from Yuba City-based Sunsweet Growers fill a snack plate. This year's plum crop for prunes is expected to be slightly smaller than last year's, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

hours than in the last couple of years. That and the fact that the trees got some rest from two years of down crops in our area, those two factors helped us out."

The total bearing acreage for prunes statewide is expected to be 48,000, which is equal to last year. Industry representatives are hoping the acreage levels off now that prices paid to farmers have improved in recent years, reaching as much as \$2,500 a ton last year.

California's prune production has dropped considerably since nearly 200,000

dry tons came out of dryers in 2006, according to NASS. Just three years ago, producers put out 138,000 tons.

Prune production dropped after a couple of failed crops in the mid-2000s enabled competitors such as Chile and France to seize part of the market share, pushing down prices, and growers switched to more profitable commodities such as walnuts and almonds.

The NASS crop estimate was based on questionnaires and phone interviews last month involving more than 200 growers.

Strawberry production lags

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

REDDING, Calif. — Unsettled spring weather has eased the brisk pace of strawberry production in California, causing it to lag slightly behind last year's pace.

As of June 2, growers in the Golden State had produced a little more than 99.7 million flats, down slightly from the nearly 101.2 million flats picked by the same time last year, according to the National Berry Report.

"This year it's going all right," said Ata Saechao, who was selling berries at a local farmers' market for Amy's Produce just south of Redding. "We've had better years," he said. "The weather has been kind of different and it's affecting our berries. We're still getting good produce out."

California has entered its peak season for strawberries, as picking is proceeding in all three of the state's major growing regions — around Oxnard, Santa Maria and Watsonville. Storms can complicate strawberry harvest, as the rain can cause ripe berries to become moldy and waterlogged.

Occasional showers spritzed the Central Coast region in April and early May, causing production levels to dip, according to the California Strawberry Commission. However, production had been off to a faster-than-normal pace in 2015 because of the dry winter.

"The year-to-date volume is not that far behind last year, and it is ahead of two years ago," commission spokeswoman Carolyn O'Donnell



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Ata Saechao, left, a berry grower south of Redding, Calif., prepares a box of strawberries for a customer at a local farmers' market on May 30. As its peak season is underway, strawberry production in California has dipped slightly below last year's pace.

said in an email.

Rainfall amounts this spring haven't approached levels seen in November and December, when a series of warm storms caused the state's strawberry production to finish last year below 2013 levels. Through much of 2014, growers were on a pace to enjoy their eighth record-setting year in the last nine years.

Even so, 2015 production levels are down for California blueberries and raspberries, too, according to the National Berry Report, which is compiled with USDA data. California producers turned out 6.46 million flats of blueberries as of June 2 compared to more than 6.5 million in the same period last year, and growers

have picked 9.4 million flats of raspberries so far compared to 10 million last year, the report states.

Blackberry production is up, with growers turning out 25.3 million flats as of June 2 compared to 23.3 million flats during the same period in 2014.

Through the winter and early spring, strawberry production maintained a brisk pace despite a downward trend in planted acres. Growers were expected to plant 37,438 acres this year, down from the 2013 total acreage of 40,816, according to the strawberry commission.

About 85 percent of the nation's strawberries come from California.

Foothill abortion vaccine trials enter home stretch

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

DAVIS, Calif. — A university scientist says he's in the home stretch of developing a vaccine for a tick-borne malady that kills calf fetuses.

A team led by University of California-Davis researcher Jeffrey Stott is expanding field trials of a vaccine for foothill abortion, which causes the loss of 45,000 to 90,000 calves a year.

Stott and other researchers have been testing the vaccine since 2011, and the USDA approved the expansion after it was shown to be effective in preventing foothill abortion in more than 2,000 head of cattle.

The two-year expanded study is likely the last step necessary before making the vaccine available for widespread use, said Stott, an immunologist at the UC-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

"All we need is a producer," he told the Capital Press. "The efficacy data is truly outstanding and the safety looks good. You can't get in too close to breeding, but we get these animals vaccinated 60-plus days before they breed and it looks really good."

"I don't think there will be a lot of questions of veterinary



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

At a 2011 workshop in Red Bluff, Calif., University of California-Davis graduate student Roxann Brooks, center, discusses work on a foothill abortion vaccine as veterinarian Tom Talbot, left, and UC-Davis researcher Jeffrey Stott listen.

biologists in licensing this," he said.

Finding a vaccine has been elusive in the decades-long fight against foothill abortion, which is caused by bacteria brought in by a tick that bites cows and heifers in dry pastures. The malady is endemic in California's coastal and foothill regions, in Southern Oregon and Northern Nevada.

The bacteria doesn't make the cow sick, but if the animal is pregnant and the fetus has not developed immunity, the bacteria can kill the fetus in 90 to 105 days. There's been no evidence of the bacteria affecting other animals, such as horses or sheep, researchers have said.

Organizations such as the California Cattlemen's Association have held numerous fundraisers for research on foothill abortion, which has decreased reproductive ability and prevented ranchers from bringing cattle into California at certain times of the year.

Among ranchers participating in the trials has been fifth-generation Lassen County cattle producer Buck Parks, who was losing an average of 25 to 30 calves each year from a herd of about 300 cows. About 20 percent of his losses were from "first-calf heifers," or first-time mother cows, a UC news release explained.

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