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Strawberry production keeps pace despite heat, fewer acres

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

WATSONVILLE, Calif. — With California’s peak strawberry harvest season winding down, production is keeping up with last year’s near-record pace despite some unusually warm weather and a slight decline in acreage. Statewide, producers had shipped 139.26 million flats of strawberries as of July 25 — about 110,000 more than at the same point last year, according to the California Strawberry Commission. Two of the state’s three major growing regions — the Watsonville and Santa Maria areas — are significantly ahead of last year, notes the commission’s weekly Pink Sheet, a production report. The pace continues as growers were expected to plant 37,438 acres this year, a decline from last year’s total of 38,937 and from the 2013

total acreage of 40,816, as water shortages and the prolific qualities of newer varieties have influenced growers’ planting decisions. Warmer-than-usual weather — particularly at night — has caused some berries to ripen so quickly that they had to be diverted to processing, commission spokeswoman Carolyn O’Donnell said. Berries sent to processing aren’t included in the fresh-market totals. “Sometimes it can be because there’s plenty of fresh so they’re diverting some of it,” O’Donnell said. “It also sometimes has to do with the quality.” Strawberries are picked in California year-round, with the peak season occurring in late spring when all of the state’s major producing regions — around Watsonville, Santa Maria and Oxnard — are shipping berries. Growers have enjoyed seven record-setting production years in the last nine seasons, bare-



The peak harvest season for strawberries is winding down. Strawberries are picked year-round in California.

ly missing an eighth in 2014 when December rain dampened yields. After a fast start this year, unsettled spring weather eased the pace of production. Shipments are nearly 4 million crates ahead of where they were at this point in 2013, the last record-setting year, the commission reports. Global production of straw-

berries is up this year, with 200.3 million flats shipped as of July 30 compared to 198.6 million a year earlier, according to the industry-compiled National Berry Report. The shipping-point prices for medium-to-large flats of strawberries from Watsonville and Santa Maria are about \$10 for conventional and \$12 for

organic, up significantly from the \$7 for commercial and \$10 for organic charged a year ago, according to the report. Much of the remaining season will hinge on how much rain is generated by El Nino conditions, which are expected to be strong this winter. Warm storms can complicate strawberry harvest, as the rain can cause ripe berries to become moldy and waterlogged. “It’s always about how that water comes,” O’Donnell said. “Usually when we think of El Nino we think of deluges. Too much water in a short period of time isn’t good for anybody. ... If it arrives in a steady stream, that’s great, but if it comes in episodic deluges then it’s more of a concern to growers in how it will affect their fields.” Among other berries, according to the National Berry Report: • Blueberry growers in the Golden State had put out about 8.2 million flats as of July 29,

down from 8.7 million at the same point last year. Oregon production is ahead of last year’s pace, with 2.6 million flats so far this year compared to a little more than 2 million at the end of July 2014. Production is up worldwide with nearly 70 million flats produced compared to 62.5 million a year ago. • Nearly 19.23 million flats of raspberries have been produced in California, down slightly from 19.27 million at the end of July 2014. Global production is up significantly, with nearly 42.3 million flats produced this year compared to 36 million for the same period in 2014. • Blackberry production is ahead of last year in California, with nearly 2.2 million flats compared to 1.9 million at the same point last year. Globally, growers have produced 28.8 million flats compared to 26.2 million at the same point last summer.

Early harvest begins for California wine grapes



A worker lugs harvested Pinot Noir grapes to a bin in a vineyard north of Napa, Calif., to be used for Mumm Napa sparkling wine. The harvest of wine grapes has begun in California.

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press NAPA, Calif. — The picking of wine grapes has begun in California’s most lucrative producing region, and vintners expect a slightly lighter crop with good quality and flavor. Pickers in the Napa Valley were out in late July filling bins with the season’s first grapes — Pinot Noir. Within a few weeks they’ll gravitate to grapes crushed for white and then red wine varieties. “They were earlier than last year, which was still an early year,” said Cate Conniff, spokeswoman for the Napa Valley Vintners Association. She said alternating warm and cool weather during the growing season led to an early bud break, a long flowering and fruit set period and an early harvest. “The quality looks great,” Conniff said. “People are very excited about the flavors.” The activity in the Napa

Valley comes as the grape harvest overall in California is beginning to escalate, reports the National Agricultural Statistics Service in Sacramento. Wine grapes amounted to about two-thirds of the grapes planted in the state last year, totaling 615,000 acres to 121,000 acres of table grapes and 192,000 acres of raisin-type grapes, according to NASS. Wine producers expect a somewhat lighter than average crop because of the long flowering and fruit set period, Conniff said. However, Napa Valley vintners typically farm for low yields by culling fruit that’s not perfectly ripe “to only bring in the fruit that reflects the best flavor for the winemaker,” she said. After three straight years of record-high crushes from 2011 to 13, wine producers in California saw a 12 percent drop in tonnage for last year’s crush, largely because of drought-related water shortages. But vintners said the smaller yield brought a

more intense flavor that made 2014 a fine vintage year. 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, NASS observed. Grapes produced in Napa County received the highest average price of \$4,077 per ton, a 10 percent jump from 2013, the agency reported. While the drought “affects everyone in California,” wine grapes are not a water-intensive crop, Conniff said. “Fine wine grapes are pretty low ... in terms of water consumption, and because fine wine grapes and grape vines require a minimal amount of water, the people that are looking to those irrigation decisions certainly don’t want to over-water,” she said. “That does not add anything to the end quality of the grapes themselves ... We’re certainly looking for concentrations of flavor.” Grapes for sparkling wines

are picked earlier because wine-makers are looking for higher levels of acidity, Conniff said. The next grapes to come off the vines will be Sauvignon Blanc, whose harvest will begin in about two weeks, she said. Chardonnay accounted for the largest percentage of the total crush volume last year at 17.3 percent, with Cabernet Sauvignon second at 12.3 percent, according to NASS. California wine shipments in the U.S. were 220 million cases in 2014, up 4.4 percent from the previous year, with an estimated retail value of \$24.6 billion, according to the San Francisco-based Wine Institute. Wine from the Golden State made up 90 percent of U.S. exports, which reached \$1.49 billion in winery revenues in 2014. That was the second-highest dollar value for U.S. wine exports and a 94 percent increase from five years ago, according to the Wine Institute.

Researchers credit almonds with lighter carbon footprint

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

DAVIS, Calif. — New university research credits almond production with having a relatively light carbon footprint compared to other crops. Two related articles in the current issue of the Journal of Industrial Ecology note that such measures as efficient irrigation and use of orchard clippings have helped reduce the industry’s greenhouse gas emissions. The scientists found that each kilogram of California almonds typically produces less than a kilogram of carbon dioxide emissions, “which is a lower carbon footprint than many other nutrient- and energy-dense foods,” concluded co-author Alissa Kendall, an associate professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at University of California-Davis.

Kendall notes the results take into account the use of almond “co-products” — orchard biomass, hulls and shells — for renewable power generation and dairy feed. As growers keep improving their nitrogen and water use efficiencies, they’ll reduce their carbon footprint even more, scientists say. The research by Kendall, University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources academic coordinator Sonja Brodt and graduate students Elias Marvinney and Weiyuan Zhu was funded by grants from the Almond Board of California and the state Department of Food and Agriculture’s Specialty Crop Block Grant program. “This is the most exhaustive food life cycle assessment study to date by UC-Davis researchers, and it demonstrates the complexity of agricultural systems and the prospects for significant environmental benefits,” said Linda Roman-

der, an Almond Board spokeswoman. “It models an almond orchard over its entire 25-year life cycle, from land preparation and planting through the productive life of the trees and eventual removal.” The research shows that using co-products is key to the industry’s environmental impact and shows the industry is making progress toward becoming “carbon neutral” or even “carbon negative” as trees accumulate and store significant amounts of carbon, Romander said in an email. A recent survey by the industry’s California Almond Sustainability Program found that 74 percent of orchards already use prunings for in-orchard chipping, composting or energy production, according to an Almond Board news release. Other byproducts include the nuts’ shells, typ-

ically used as livestock bedding or alternative energy in cogeneration plants, and their hulls, used as livestock feed, the release explains. The UC-Davis study provides more ammunition for the Almond Board as it deflects criticism from some media outlets and environmental groups over the industry’s use of water during the drought. In June, the board announced it would commit an additional \$2.3 million toward independent research into next-generation farming practices. According to CASP, 83 percent of California almond growers practice “demand-based” irrigation — watering only when instrument readings and weather conditions suggest the trees need it — and more than 70 percent of orchards use micro-irrigation.

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