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California

Pistachio shells empty; yields down

Some orchards seeing 70 percent ‘blanks’

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

DAVIS, Calif. — Pistachio yields are coming in lighter than expected as some growers are encountering more empty shells than normal because of the drought and other factors.

At Fiddymment Farms in Lincoln, Calif., dry conditions have led to an early harvest, said Memphis Burton, who was operating a booth for the company at a farmers’ market here.

“They said it’s not going to yield as much as it has in the past,” Burton said.

While the pistachio harvest normally begins around Sept. 1, many farms were already shaking trees and gathering nuts from catch basins by mid-August, said Richard Matoian, executive director of American Pistachio Growers in Fresno.

What many have found is an inordinate amount of “blanks” — fully formed shells in which a nut never developed inside, Matoian said.

In a typical season, blanks might make up 10 percent of a crop, but in some orchards this season the number is closer to 70 percent, he said.

A big reason is a lack of chilling hours in the winter, which causes the male and female trees in an orchard to bloom at different times. An orchard needs about 800 hours at below 45 degrees, which hasn’t happened for two successive winters.

“Normally they’d all be synchronized in what they do” during bloom, Matoian said. Because of the uneven blossom, “the nutlets don’t get pollenized,” he said.

“No. 2 would be the drought,” he said. “Lack of water causes those trees that are stressed to not fill the shell with a viable nut.”

The low yields come after industry insiders had expected a crop of at least 450 million pounds, with a possibility of meeting or surpassing last year’s 520 million pound crop. Now growers say the crop could be as small as 350 million pounds.

The light yields are a blip of sorts amid a winning streak for pistachios, whose popularity and acreage have ballooned in recent years. There are now more than 300,000 acres of pistachios in the ground, with 225,000 acres bearing, compared to 105,000 bearing acres in 2005, Matoian said.

Nearly all of the United States’ pistachio production is in California, and 97 percent of that is in the San Joaquin Valley.

The acreage is booming despite the drought, largely because pistachio trees have a longer life span than other nut trees and can survive several years in a row of water stress even if they don’t produce nuts, Matoian said.

Matoian believes that once the orchards receive enough chilling hours and water in a season, the state could be in for a huge pistachio crop.

“We’ve had successive years of below-normal per-acre yields due to the lack of chilling hours and due to the drought, but I think there’s going to be a year when we get a perfect storm, when everything is going to line up and we’ll have a large crop,” he said.

“We’re not there yet, but the acres are in the ground to support a huge crop,” he said. “We just need chilling hours, we need water and we need to have sunshine during the summer months.”

El Nino: Wet S. California, dry NW

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

Forecasters say they are now confident that El Nino’s southern storms will boost rainfall this winter as far north as Sacramento in California, but the Pacific Northwest will likely be drier than normal.

Federal Climate Prediction Center officials said Sept. 10 there’s a 95 percent chance that strong El Nino conditions will persist through the winter before gradually weakening next spring.

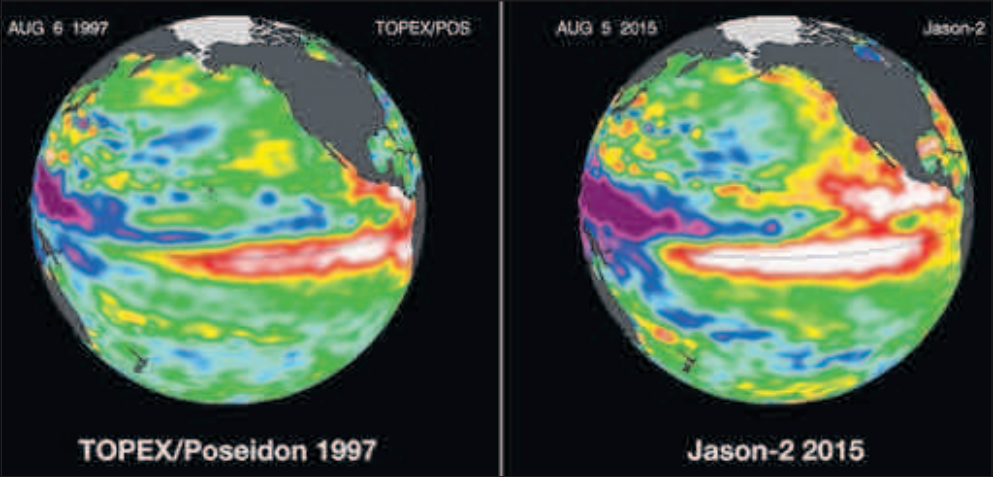
During the winter, odds favor increased chances for above-normal precipitation across the southern part of the United States and up the East Coast, officials said.

But the inland Pacific Northwest should anticipate below-normal rainfall, while the Oregon and Washington coasts and much of Northern California have equal chances of above- or below-average precipitation, according to the CPC’s three-month winter outlook.

Temperatures throughout the West are expected to be higher than normal this winter, complicating chances for an abundant snowpack, according to the outlook.

“One thing to caution a little bit is that these are probabilistic forecasts,” Mike Halpert, the center’s deputy director, told reporters in a conference call. “We could be surprised.... There have been a couple of big El Ninos when I don’t think it was really dry anywhere across the country. Everywhere was above normal.

“But the most likely case (in the Northwest) is drier than



These false-color images provided by NASA satellites compare warm Pacific Ocean water temperatures from the strong El Nino that brought North America large amounts of rainfall in 1997, left, and the current El Nino as of Aug. 5, right. Warmer ocean water that normally stays in the western Pacific, shown as lighter orange, red and white areas, moves east along the equator toward the Americas. Forecasters say this El Nino is already the second strongest on record for this time of year and could be one of the most potent weather changers in 65 years.

look.

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Conditions ripe for big navel orange crop

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Growers and the USDA are bracing for a drought-defying bumper crop of navel oranges in the 2015-2016 season.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service’s initial navel orange forecast is 86 million cartons, up more than 8 percent from last season’s 76 million cartons harvested, even with at least 2,000 fewer acres of bearing trees in the ground.

While California Citrus Mutual, a growers’ group with more than 2,000 members, argued that last year’s NASS initial prediction of 81 million cartons was too high, the

group mostly agrees with this forecast.

“It wasn’t too much of a surprise given what we’ve been hearing from the guys in the field and observing,” said Bob Blakely, vice president of the Exeter-based Citrus Mutual. “The unknown in there is knowing how much acreage has actually been taken out (because of a lack of water). They’ve said it’s 2,000 acres.

“Most of our growers feel

like they’re seeing more fruit on the trees and the size is better,” Blakely said. “Combining the two of those factors, it does look like the crop is going to be a little bit up from last year.”

The big crop estimate is fueled by reports that fruit size is larger and fruit set, especially on late varieties, is better in most groves, according to Citrus Mutual. The improved fruit size is attributed to timely rainfall and good growing

conditions following petal fall last spring, the group explains.

As a strong El Nino is expected to bring more rain than normal this winter in the San Joaquin Valley, early rains could result in additional growth that would equate to more cartons, Citrus Mutual states.

NASS’ survey indicated a fruit set per tree of 412, above the five-year average of 336, and the average Sept. 1 diameter was at 2.248 inches, above the five-year average of 2.23 inches.

Warm temperatures this summer improved the oranges’ brix, or sugar content, raising hopes for good flavor, Citrus Mutual explained. The harvest is expected to begin in early October.

Blakely

Blakely

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