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# California

## Navel oranges plentiful amid bumper crop

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press

The pickings are sweet and plentiful as navel orange growers in California's San Joaquin Valley are a few weeks into their harvest of what is expected to be a bumper crop.

The first navel oranges started coming off trees in early October as growers expect to harvest 86 million cartons in the 2015-2016 season, up more than 8 percent from last season's 76 million cartons harvested, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Tests showed that even the season's first oranges had a high sugar content, said Bob Blakely, vice president of the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual.

"The only thing that was slowing it down was waiting for color," Blakely said. "We have a color standard as well as a maturity standard."

The weather has been co-



Courtesy California Citrus Mutual

Navel oranges are harvested in a grove on the west side of California's San Joaquin Valley. This season's harvest began in early October, and growers have been seeing high sugar contents and high utilization rates from the beginning.

operating, too. Recent nighttime temperatures in the 30s have brought out the color, and while occasional rain showers have interrupted picking, the rain helps the oranges develop size.

Packing houses can use ethylene gas to de-green oranges, but they prefer that the oranges

develop color naturally before they are shipped, Blakely said.

"It gives us a stronger piece of fruit to put in the box and make that export trip," he said. "We're there now."

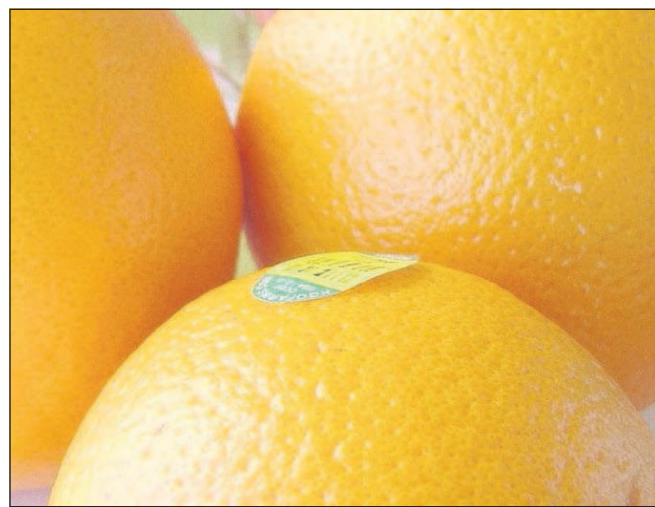
The big crop estimate was fueled by reports that fruit size was larger and fruit set, especially on late varieties, is better

in most groves, according to Citrus Mutual. The improved size was attributed to timely rainfall and good growing conditions following petal fall last spring, the group explained.

Warm weather this summer improved the oranges' brix, or sugar content, raising hopes for good flavor, Citrus Mutual explained.

The bumper crop is expected even with at least 2,000 fewer acres of bearing trees in the ground as California's prime citrus growing region in Fresno, Tulare and Kings counties have received no federal surface water in the past two years because of the drought. Growers have been relying heavily on groundwater, which in some areas is running out.

Pickers are now focusing on blocks with larger fruit and leaving smaller oranges on trees to continue to grow, as smaller fruit often must be discounted to move it out, Blakeley said.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

A recent California cold snap actually helped navel oranges, an industry group reports.

## Brief cold snap helps navel oranges build color, flavor

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — The cold snap that brought freezing nighttime temperatures to much of California's Central Valley on Thanksgiving weekend actually helped navel oranges, an industry group reports.

While freezes can be disastrous for citrus fruit, temperatures in the coldest areas of the valley dropped to 27 or 28 degrees for only a short time, which is ideal this early in the navel season, the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual said.

For navels, the brief shots of frigid temperatures improve color and flavor. And while the valley's mandarin crop is usually less tolerant of the cold, it appeared unscathed by the recent weather, the group said.

A strong inversion layer soon arrived to push temperatures up, and anticipated clouds and rain in the first weeks of December should keep night-time lows in the 30s or even 40s, according to the National Weather Service.

"If this weekend's temperatures are a sign of what's to come this winter, it could mean good things for the valley's citrus crop," Citrus

Mutual spokeswoman Alyssa Houtby said in an email.

A relatively frost-free winter would be a welcome trend for growers after freezes during the 2013-2014 harvest cost the citrus industry about \$441 million in revenue, including \$260 million lost to navel orange producers and processors, according to Citrus Mutual.

Last season, a New Year's cold snap had growers deploying irrigation and wind machines, costing them about \$5 million in fuel. Wind machines were running in mandarin orchards last weekend in Kern, Tulare, Fresno and Madera counties to keep orchard temperatures up, Citrus Mutual reports.

Nonetheless, citrus harvests remained in full swing, as mandarin oranges were picked and packed for domestic sales while lemons, Satuma oranges and Melo Gold hybrid grapefruit continued to be packed for export, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service office in Sacramento.

The federal Climate Prediction Center envisions higher-than-normal temperatures and equal chances of above- or below-normal precipitation for most of California over the next month.

## Group's Food Network ads cast wide demographic net

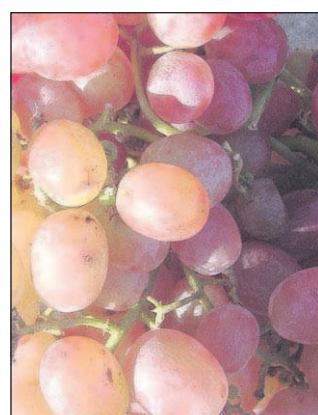
By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press

A California commodity group is marketing Central Valley table grapes through a unique partnership with the Food Network.

The Fresno-based California Table Grape Commission has had a pair of commercials airing exclusively on the cable channel and its sister network, the Cooking Channel, this fall.

The commercials, which show a grower picking a bunch of grapes to serve at a family dinner and three generations of growers strolling in a vineyard, airs on such popular shows as "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives," "Cutthroat Kitchen" and "Cupcake Wars," according to the commission.

Kathleen Nave, the commission's president, said the spots are aimed at the primary shopper in families and that



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Red table grapes from California fill a tray. The California Table Grape Commission is maintaining a marketing agreement with the Food Network as it also seeks new research projects on the healthful qualities of grapes.

the Food Network's media properties reach consumers in virtually all demographic groups. She said more advertising spots are planned for the

network in 2016.

"What we did was we looked around the country at vertically integrated media properties — magazines, radio and TV," Nave said. "We wanted to work with one company with multiple media... After a lot of research, the Food Network is the one that emerged."

The commission has been working for several years with the Food Network, including advertising in its magazine, Nave said.

The latest two commercials "are pretty much off the charts in terms of memorability and motivation," she said. "I think those are working well."

The ads are part of the commission's larger strategy of marketing table grapes as a healthful food. The panel has been accepting proposals for its next round of health research grants after having funded studies that touted grapes' benefits for heart, joint,

brain and eye health, as well as their potential for lowering risk of certain cancers.

"We have a global campaign of consumer messaging in the U.S., Canada and 25 export markets, and it's all the same campaign," Nave said. "The underlying idea is that grapes have the potential to provide health benefits above and beyond their nutrition value."

Nave said market research has shown that anti-aging properties in foods are "a big interest to consumers." She said grapes' image as a healthful food is enabling demand to keep up with rising production, which two years ago set a record at 116.3 million 19-pound boxes.

Growers are nearing the end of this year's harvest, which is expected to match last year's yield of about 110 million cartons, according to Nave.

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49-2/#8