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California

Storms slow harvest of short navel crop, push up prices

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

CAPAY, Calif. — Winter storms are disrupting the harvest of navel oranges in California, but the slower pace is helping the fruit gain in price.

For Bev Seale, who grows navels in the mid-Sacramento Valley, the high winds that came with several storms in January caused trees to lose up to half their oranges, she said.

“The weather has been unmerciful on my crop,” Seale said. “The flavor is wonderful. The oranges sized up beautifully. But this year I’ve probably lost about half my oranges on the ground.”

Such damage has been isolated, however. In the prime growing region in the San Joaquin Valley, growers are mostly grappling with muddy orchard floors and having to apply treatments against the fungus that can come with heavy rains, said Bob Blakely, vice president of California Citrus Mutual.

“It’s disrupted the harvest-



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Capay, Calif., navel orange grower Bev Seale has sustained some crop damage from high winds in recent weeks, she said. Other growers have had to contend with muddy ground in groves and had to treat trees for fungus that can develop after heavy rains.

ing schedule,” Blakely said. “They’ve been able to get in and get the market supplied.

It’s made for some muddy conditions, but they’re getting the crop out.”

The crop was already turning out to be smaller than originally estimated, he said. Going into the season, growers were expecting an 81 million-carton crop, down from the 88 million cartons weighing 1.76 million tons that came out of groves in a weather-bolstered 2015-2016 season, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service office in Sacramento.

The smaller crop wasn’t a surprise considering last year’s abundance, but it’s turning out to be as much as 18 percent below last year’s production, Blakely said.

“It’s sizing, but it sized slower,” he said. “We don’t have an abundance of large fruit, and big fruit makes more boxes. We’re seeing really good quality right now and the fruit is eating well.”

A silver lining for growers is that the slow pace and undersized crop has pushed up prices. Mid-sized oranges, which make up the bulk of the crop, have risen \$1 a box since December and are now

between \$11 and \$12 a box, Blakely said.

“I think we’re going to see that continue to come up gradually,” he said.

Prices typically increase after New Year’s Day, but this year the increase was especially needed, he said.

“Prices had been lower than they had been for two or three years,” Blakely said. “They were getting to the point that growers were reaching a break-even or loss scenario, so we needed to see the price move up. I would expect prices will continue to rise in the next few weeks, especially as the market realizes this crop is going to be short.”

The navel harvest typically runs from mid-autumn until the following summer. Early in the season, pickers usually focus on blocks with larger fruit and leave smaller oranges on trees to continue to grow, as smaller fruit often must be discounted to move it out.

The harvest is now about 35 percent complete, Blakely said.

Drought debate intensifies among lawmakers

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Is California still in a drought? It depends on who you ask.

A group of legislators and water district officials at the northern end of the state say the winter’s deluges and heavy snowpack prove the drought is over, and they want Gov. Jerry Brown to declare it so.

“Our reservoirs are filled or are filling, and our groundwater is replenished,” said state Sen. Jim Nielsen, one of the handful of officials asking Brown to end his more than 3-year-old state of emergency.

The governor’s executive orders mandating continued, long-term water savings were appropriate, “but this power should not be abused,” Nielsen said. “This drought is over.”

Not so fast, state officials argue. There are still about two months left in the current rainy season, and even if it continues to be wet, eight of the last 10 years in California have been dry, they contend.

“Many Californians continue to experience the effects of drought and a number of Central Valley communities still depend on water tanks and bottled water,” state Department of Water Resources spokeswoman Nancy Vogel said in an email.

She notes that after the previous drought declaration was ended in March 2011, severe drought returned the following year, leading to the driest four-year period in the state’s history.

The debate comes as the U.S. Drought Monitor shows that drought has completely receded from areas north of Sacramento and conditions have dramatically improved elsewhere, including the San Joaquin Valley, which has been hit the hardest.

California’s statewide snowpack was at 173 percent of normal on Feb. 6 — a development that has prompted the California Farm Bureau Federation and other groups to ask for more generous water allocations for growers this summer.

As rain continued to fall this week, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation increased flood-control releases into the Sacramento and American rivers, and local agencies responded to numerous reports of localized flooding.

Nielsen and others — including state Sen. Ted Gaines and Assemblymen Brian Dahle, James Gallagher and Kevin Kiley, all Republicans — said the latest drought taught Californians to conserve by substituting more drought-tolerant plants, taking shorter showers and using more efficient watering systems.

“With the recent rainstorms, most of the major reservoirs are above average so significantly that the local water districts are currently at or above their normal operating ranges,” stated the letter, which was also signed by Northern California Water Association president David Guy and a dozen local officials.

But state and federal officials have pushed back against suggestions that the drought has ended.

“The state is still responding to requests for assistance related to impacts arising from the drought,” National Weather Service warning coordinator Michelle Mead said in an email. “These impacts stem from a variety of conditions and local water management capabilities that are not necessarily alleviated from the extreme events of the last month.”

There is no “rulebook” for when a drought is declared or rescinded, Vogel said. Local governments can declare drought emergencies, and California governors through the years have declared both regional and statewide droughts, she said.

Lower prices, acreage squeeze California Wheat Commission budget

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

The California Wheat Commission expects less revenue this year as a result of low prices and fewer acres planted, its executive director says.

With low prices, executive director Claudia Carter expects fewer acres to be planted, which will mean lower revenue from assessments collected from growers.

“It’s not an optimistic picture that we see for this coming fiscal year,” she said. “The commission has been trying to see which areas we can retain some funding.”

Carter’s not sure yet how much lower next year’s budget will be.

For the current year, the



Courtesy of Matt Salvo/California Farm Bureau Federation

Claudia Carter, executive director of the California Wheat Commission, says assessment revenue will likely be lower this year because prices and acreage are down.

commission is doing better than the \$600,000 it budget-

ed — roughly \$40,000 more, Carter said.

Online

<http://www.californiawheat.org/>

The commission has a milling and baking laboratory, which receives a fee for its services. The lab income has increased, which has helped cover the commission’s operating expenses, Carter said.

The commission also released its variety survey the week of Jan. 30.

The commission typically conducts an annual survey, but missed last year due to staff changes, Carter said.

“It helps the growers to make decisions, helps the commission to know the area that’s being planted and how much will be harvested for grain,” Carter said.

The survey asks growers if they plan to grow wheat this year. Growers typically select a high-yielding variety with high protein content and good disease resistance, Carter said.

In the survey, the commission also asks the number of acres; whether the land is dryland, irrigated or organic; and whether the crop will be cut for green chop or forage. The survey also covers planted acres lost to drought or flooding.

The information helps the commission board as it prepares its new budget. The commission collects an assessment on wheat of 7.5 cents per hundredweight.

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