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The harvest of navel oranges in the San Joaquin Valley is about 70 percent complete as the blossom for next year's crop is at its peak.

Navel oranges in good condition as harvest enters home stretch

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Navel orange growers are slogging through their season, as 70 percent of the harvest is complete despite rains that have slowed their progress.

The picking continues as the blossom for next year's crop is at its peak, preventing growers from using pesticides, said Alyssa Houtby, spokeswoman for the Exeter, Calif.-based California Citrus Mutual.

But the crop has remained in good shape despite wild swings in the weather. Utilization rates — the percentage of oranges that can be sold as fresh and not discarded or diverted to juice — have remained above 80 percent, she said.

"We're moving along," Houtby said. "There's a lot of harvesting going on in Exeter right now."

The harvest of navels in the San Joaquin Valley typically begins in mid-autumn and continues until the following summer. Storms disrupted the harvest this winter, as growers grappled with muddy orchard floors and had to apply treatments against the fungus that can come with heavy rains.

Growers were concerned that the intermittent storms and warm sunshine would combine to cause issues with rot, but so far those issues haven't materialized, Houtby said.

Growers have reported

their crop is smaller than originally estimated. Going into the season, farms 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 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, CCM vice president Bob Blakely has said.

The slow pace and undersized crop have enhanced the increase in price that normally happens after New Year's Day, which was needed as prices earlier this season were lower than they had been for several years.

As of March 31, an 8-pound bag of navel oranges sold for an average of \$6.44, up from \$5.33 the previous week and \$5.46 at the same point last year, according to the USDA's National Retail Report.

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 slower pace of harvest helped some fruit gain in size.

Demand has been steady this spring for mid-sized to larger oranges, Houtby said.

Growers struggling to make use of 'overwhelming' data, experts say

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

WOODLAND, Calif. — There's a wealth of digital data available to growers, but the challenge is to put it all together and present it in a way that's easy for them to use, experts say.

The advent of drones, smart sensors and robotics is revolutionizing farming and enabling growers to "trade knowledge for effort," said David Slaughter, a biological and agricultural engineering professor who runs the University of California-Davis SmartFarm project.

The challenge, however, is keeping track of it all and being able to access it quickly, said Bob Payne, a tree nut and row crop farmer in the southern Sacramento Valley.

"Now we have so much data that managing the data is just overwhelming," he said. "There are different platforms for every program."

Payne said he's looking forward to the day when different sets of data "can talk to each other."

"Sometimes right now it's hard to make a decision be-



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

From left, Monsanto strategic account manager Candace Wilson moderates a panel discussion on ag technology with David Slaughter of the University of California-Davis, Erik Ehn of Blue River Technology and nut and row crop farmer Bob Payne. They agreed that a lot of data is available to farmers, but the hurdle is putting it to good use.

cause there's just too much of it," he said.

Slaughter and Payne were taking part in a panel discussion on the opportunities and challenges of new ag technology during a recent media tour and presentation at Monsanto's vegetable seed research and development lab in Woodland.

The discussion comes as new technology is becoming a game changer for many

irrigation. And automation is being developed for harvesting everything from raisins to apples.

Blue River Technology, a Sunnyvale, Calif., company with about 50 employees, has developed a machine that helps lettuce growers thin their crop. Growers typically overplant to be sure to get enough top-quality lettuce, and the camera-equipped machine weeds out the rest by applying a lethal dose of fertilizer that won't harm neighboring plants or the soil, said Erik Ehn, Blue River's director of product management.

"There's a tremendous amount of innovation going on in agriculture," said Sam Eathington, chief scientist for The Climate Corp., a Monsanto subsidiary. The company examines weather, soil and field data to help growers determine potential yield-limiting factors in their fields, according to its website.

Variability is a factor in every agricultural field, and the key is finding the right inputs and hybrid plants that will work better in each soil type, Eathington said.

commodities. For instance, the dairy industry is developing technology that can distill cow manure into dry fertilizer and clean water, making polluted runoff from dairies a problem of the past.

UC Cooperative Extension researchers are also testing tree monitors and weather gauges connected to online data systems and new advances in aerial imagery to help growers with precision

Groups say new fuel, vehicle taxes disproportionately hit ag

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Farm groups are displeased over the Legislature's passage of \$52 billion in new vehicle and fuel taxes over the next decade that they say will disproportionately impact growers.

Lawmakers late April 6 approved Gov. Jerry Brown's more than \$5 billion-a-year plan to fund major road repairs, which will hike vehicle registration fees while raising gas taxes by 12 cents a gallon and increasing diesel sales taxes from 16 cents to 36 cents per gallon.

Western Growers president and chief executive officer Tom Nassif argued the tax increases will add to the "staggering regulatory burdens and costs placed on California farmers" that "have already placed our industry at a competitive disadvantage relative to other states" and countries.

California Citrus Mutual leaders agreed.

"Any increase in transportation costs cannot be passed on to consumers," CCM spokeswoman Alyssa Houtby told the Capital Press. "We are price takers, not price setters. Any time the government

imposes fees or regulations ... it directly impacts the bottom line to the grower."

Western Growers and CCM were among more than two dozen agricultural groups that had urged lawmakers to oppose Senate Bill 1, the transportation bill by Sen. Jim Beall, D-San Jose. Other groups included the California Farm Bureau Federation, the California Fresh Fruit Association, the Almond Alliance and the California Cattlemen's Association.

The groups asserted the new taxes will dramatically increase costs for farmers and ranchers who use large vehicles to manage their operations and bring their products to market, while a significant portion of the money will go to urban public transportation, trails and commuter corridors that are far removed from rural areas and won't benefit the growers.

Trucks that producers use will likely be subject to the top tier for registration fees, while many agricultural vehicles are also subject to weight fees, the groups told

lawmakers in an April 3 letter. New registration fees will range from \$25 to \$175 depending on the value of the vehicle, and the taxes and fees will rise each year with inflation.

The 20-cent-per-gallon increase for diesel fuel is "a pretty significant number," said Justin Oldfield, the California Cattlemen's Association's vice president of government affairs.

"It's a tax that everyone is going to have to pay for," Oldfield said. "Whether you're poor or in a business ... you're going to be required to pay it."

However, the bill does restrict future regulations on greenhouse gas emissions for commercial trucks — a concession to the trucking industry that displeased environmentalists.

The bill passed the Senate and Assembly by the two-thirds majorities needed for tax increases after a week of campaigning by Brown, Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon and Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de Leon.



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