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Weather could complicate rebound for prune crop

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

RED BLUFF, Calif. — A sense of nervous optimism prevails in California's prune industry as this year's yields are expected to rebound from the weather-impacted short crop of 2016.

This year's prune crop is forecast at 105,000 tons, more than double the 51,000 tons that came out of dryers in 2016, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service office in Sacramento.

Plum trees for prunes took advantage of breaks in the rainy weather this spring to achieve decent pollination, unlike last year, when late-season storms spoiled much of the crop. Growers expect a heavier crop this year with good fruit size, NASS reports.

"The prune crop looks great," said Michael Vasey, general manager of Lindauer River Ranch in Red Bluff. "I think most everyone's pretty excited about it. We had a good enough break that we had a good bloom."

Still, much will depend



Tim Hearden/Capital Press File

Miguel Gillien operates a receiver during last year's plum harvest at Edwards Ranch near Red Bluff, Calif. The crop is expected to rebound this year after the 2016 crop was drastically reduced because of storms during the bloom.

on how the crop progresses this summer, cautions Greg Thompson, general manager of the Yuba City-based Prune Bargaining Association. Already, "a lot more" fruit is dropping to the ground than normal, he said.

Thompson recalls the big El Nino winter of 1997-98. That year, prune producers

were expecting a 170,000-ton crop, but the rain and gloomy skies that extended into the summer led to a crop of only 102,000 tons.

Actual results often differ from pre-harvest crop estimates, but this year's estimate could end up being off by as much as 20 percent, he said.

"We don't know what this

crop's going to end up with because of this crazy weather pattern we're in," he said. "This seems to be more like an El Nino year than last year, which was officially an El Nino. ... We're seeing a little bit of the same kind of pattern out in the orchard this year with the fruit crop (as in 1998)."

Thompson spoke as another

weather system was spritzing the Sacramento Valley on June 8 and bringing unseasonably low temperatures. Some areas were expecting up to a half-inch of rain.

The uncertainty comes as the industry has been trying to market California prunes as a higher-quality alternative to those from competitors such as Chile and Argentina.

Thompson contends that South American growers' practice of sun-drying plums rather than putting them in dryers produces prunes that are smaller, less sweet and less nutritious, but they can be sold for about half the price of California prunes.

Though the state's growers are taking measures to differentiate their product, such as thinning trees to enhance fruit size, the cheaper prunes flooding the marketplace affect everyone.

"The pricing is not great," Vasey said. "They (prune marketers) haven't had the sales they expected. Even though we had a short crop last year ... the price, if anything, might have come down a little be-

cause they had a big crop in South America."

With environmental and labor costs rising, a producer in the Golden State needs to receive at least \$2,000 per dry ton to break even, Thompson said. Prices have been edging downward in recent years from the \$2,630-per-ton average payments that producers received for the 2014 crop.

"We need \$2,500 a ton to make it interesting (to growers), especially with what we're trying to do with our labor" and with California's more rigorous environmental regulations, Thompson said. "If you can't get \$2,500 a ton, growers may say, 'I'm going to push these out and grow something that doesn't take so much labor.'"

Bearing acreage of plums for prunes has been steadily decreasing from a high of 86,000 in 2001. In all, 44,000 acres of prunes are projected this year, down from 45,000 acres in 2016, according to NASS. The French prune variety accounts for virtually all dried plum acreage in California.



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FFA Opens Doors to Ag Career



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

FFA member Cooper Deitz of Orland, Calif., tries out the cab of a Caterpillar at the Glenn County Fair in Orland in late May. He wants to go to a college program that specializes in heavy equipment.

ORLAND, Calif. -- FFA member Cooper Deitz already has his future mapped out ahead of him. A student at Orland High School, Deitz, 15, is working for a local hay producer, driving heavy equipment and doing general farm labor. His goal is to attend the Caterpillar Dealer Service Technician Program at San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, where students take classes and do an apprenticeship for the heavy equipment dealer.

"All the classes they do are integrated with the equipment," said Deitz, who was at the Glenn County Fair in Orland in late May. His long-term goal is to work in agriculture, he said.

"My dad, when he was a kid, farmed," Deitz said. "I like farming."

Deitz developed a love for agriculture in 4-H and, later, FFA. He took several animals to the fair, with his heifer taking second place and his heifer calf winning its class.

He started as a youngster showing dairy calves and

then lambs, and brought his first steer to the fair as a sixth-grader.

"I'd always wanted to show a steer," he said.

More recently, Deitz began raising hay, using his school's farm and placing second and third, respectively, in a contest conducted by Butte College in Oroville.

"I'm trying to expand and get more ground," he said.

The Caterpillar program is a four-year, state-approved apprenticeship program that provides training through San Joaquin Delta's Heavy Equipment and Diesel Technology Department, according to its website.

Through the program, students can earn an Associate of Science and two years of credit toward a state journey-level certificate. In the next two years, the students work as full-time apprentice technicians at sponsoring Caterpillar dealerships and earn journey-level certification, the website explains.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

FFA member Cooper Deitz of Orland, Calif., walks with one of his entries in the Glenn County Fair in Orland in late May. He wants to pursue an agriculture-related career, he said.

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