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California

Heat damage could further diminish processing tomato crop

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Growers of processing tomatoes are waiting to see whether the recent heat wave in California caused extensive damage to a crop that is already diminished because of a global glut.

A week of triple-digit temperatures starting June 16 may have caused flowers to drop off younger plants or sunburned or stunted the growth of more mature fruit, said Bruce Rominger, a Winters, Calif., grower and board chairman of the California Tomato Growers Association.

"I'm sure this heat we just came out of probably hurt" the crop, Rominger said. "We don't really know how much damage was done."

The degree of damage will become more apparent during the harvest later in the summer, he said.

Growers are already expected to record their lowest contracted production since 2006, as processors reported earlier this year they would have contracts for 11.6 million tons, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Processors expect production this summer will come from 235,000 acres, the lowest contracted acreage since 1988 and a 10 percent decrease from 2016, NASS reports.

The lesser contracts follow record production in 2014 and 2015, which left a large carryover supply in warehouses. That has pushed down prices to growers, from \$80 per ton in 2015 to about \$72.50 per ton last year, according to the CTGA.

Growers this summer will need high yields to do more than break even, Rominger said.

"There's not much money in it" this season, he said.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Jeff Mingay of Iron Tree Solutions in Williams, Calif., changes a pressure line on a tomato harvester. Processing tomato growers are waiting to see if the recent heat wave caused widespread damage to their crop.

Most growers have other crops to fall back on, he said.

Heat damage would be only the latest in a series of headaches for tomato growers in recent years.

In 2013, an outbreak of the beet curly top virus spoiled some of the processing tomato crop and forced some growers to replant. That summer, a one-two punch of unseasonable rain in June and

record heat around the Fourth of July damaged some tomatoes in northern areas.

As growers were filling contracts of roughly 14 million tons in 2014 and 2015, drought-related water shortages prompted some of them to idle acreage they would have planted in other crops.

Weather had already complicated this year's crop before the summer began, as

rain in April disrupted planting, Rominger said.

Amid the heat wave, some northern areas topped 110 degrees on several successive days.

California leads the world in processing tomato production and accounts for about 94 percent of processing tomato acreage in the U.S., according to the USDA Economic Research Service.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Freshly picked peaches. A pair of University of California cost analyses suggest that canning peach farmers might benefit from growing later varieties.

Canning peach growers could benefit from later varieties, study finds

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

MODESTO, Calif. — Growers of peaches for canning could benefit by investing in later-harvest varieties, studies by University of California researchers suggest.

While processors pay more for peaches harvested early in the season, later varieties have higher yields and are cheaper to hand-thin the fruit, said the reports from the UC's Agricultural Issues Center and Cooperative Extension.

Early-season peaches have less time to grow, so more fruit must be removed so the remaining fruit can size. That means it costs a grower more to produce fewer peaches, explained co-author Roger Duncan, a Modesto-based UCCE adviser.

Labor costs will only increase as California moves toward a \$15-per-hour minimum wage by 2022, Duncan noted.

"You can still make money being a peach grower," he said. "The problem, of course, is it's still very labor intensive and it's difficult to find the labor. It's not only expensive, but it's just hard to find. When it comes to thinning and harvesting, you need a lot of labor and you need it right away."

Canning peach harvests generally run from early July to early September, unlike fresh-market peaches, which are picked from May through September, Duncan said.

Though later varieties are harvested later in the summer, all the varieties are susceptible to heat, he said.

"It all depends on when the heat hits," he said. "What happens is you get peaches that may not quite be ripe yet, but inside it kind of ripens faster than the outside and it could get mushy. It could go from almost being ready to pick to being overripe in a very short period of time."

The studies looked at two hypothetical 100-acre farms with 40 acres of cling peaches, with one harvesting early and the other late. The researchers found that farmers could net as much as \$800 more per acre from late-harvesting varieties because of labor cost savings and higher yields.

The studies estimate that extra-early varieties would have a price of \$545 per ton, a yield of 17 tons per acre, and a thinning cost of \$1,445 per acre. The late varieties would have a price of \$490 per ton, a yield of 20 tons per acre and a thinning cost of \$1,177 per acre, according to the UC's estimates.

California facing severe fire season

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — With nearly 30,000 acres charred already, California could be in for a severe wildfire season, U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein said Thursday as firefighters worked to contain blazes around the state.

Feinstein cited the increase in brush spawned by the winter's heavy rains and the recent severe heat wave that dried out vegetation.

"Making matters worse, six years of drought has left us with more than 100 million dead trees," she said in a statement. "This overabundance of fuel, combined with fires that are burning hotter and faster, has created a potentially catastrophic scenario in California that poses an increased risk not only to property but also the brave men and women fighting these fires."

California has so far not had the type of infernos that have destroyed hundreds or thousands of homes in the past, but fires have been occurring from the Oregon border to San Diego County.

Most have been in wildlands but some have occurred dangerously close to homes, including two blazes among hillside residences in the Los Angeles area on Wednesday.

Active new blazes include a 760-acre wildfire burning on the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps base in San Diego County and in neighboring brushlands of San Clemente, and a 630-acre blaze on the Mariposa County foothills of the western Sierra Nevada.

The Pendleton fire resulted in a smoke alert from regional air quality regulators as it spread a strong odor across Orange and Los Angeles counties early in the day, but it was 70 percent contained by evening.

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