

Strawberries, wine boost ag production

2012 Crop Report for county released

Agriculture

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WATSONVILLE — The value of agricultural commodities in Santa Cruz County reached \$566.2 million in 2012, an increase of \$474,000 over the previous year, according to the 2012 crop report released by the county's office of the agricultural commissioner on Monday.

The crop report, which shows acreage, yield and gross value of agricultural products in the county, from timber to berries, showed a strong and stable industry, according to Agricultural Commissioner Mari Lou Nicoletti.

"It shows that agriculture remains strong and viable in the county and we are still a major contributor to the local economy," said Nicoletti, who estimated the economic contri-

bution to be about \$1.6 billion based on the crop values, using multiplier effects.

The top single crop in acreage and in value remained the strawberry, with 3,829 acres valued at just over \$191 million.

In total, there were 14 crops — some combined in "catch-all" categories such as "miscellaneous vegetables" — that grossed a million dollars or more.

Standouts from the report for Nicoletti include a remarkable turnaround for wine grapes, which experienced a terrible year in 2011 due to poor weather; strawberries, though still dominant, went down a little in value compared to the previous year; raspberries had a good year and are "catching up" with strawberries; apples

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and vegetables were stable, and nursery stock was slightly down.

Nicoletti attributed the decrease in nursery stock to the closure of a large nursery during the year.

King crop: strawberry

While the number of strawberry acres planted went down slightly in 2012 (3,829 compared to 3,883 in 2011), production per acre went up.

Carolyn O'Donnell, communications director for the California Strawberry Commission, said favorable weather conditions and newer varieties, which generate greater yields, led to the increase.

O'Donnell said the new varieties, which take years to develop, often have pesticide and disease resistance built in and help increase efficiencies on the ground.

Strawberries did experience a decrease in price over the previous year, leading to a decrease in overall crop value from \$198.2 million in 2011 to \$191 million in 2012.

O'Donnell said the price is sensitive to supply, so when the supply is up, price will go down.

The county's No. 2 crop, raspberries, put in a strong showing in 2012. Acreage was down slightly but production was up, as was the price.

Raspberry and blackberry grower John Eiskamp, who grows Driscoll's own varieties, said buyers are confident in their product and they will continue to keep up supply to meet the growing demand.

Wine grapes in the region

If Santa Cruz County's annual crop report was treated like a scorecard, wine grapes would be crowned the year's overall winner.

Not only did production go up — an almost threefold increase over 2011 — but price as well, with the price per ton having increased from \$2,400 in 2011 to \$2,700 in 2012.

In total, the county produced 1,991 tons of wine grapes valued at \$5,375,000, a significant increase from the 670 tons produced in 2011 with a corresponding value of \$1,607,000.

John Bargetto of Bargetto Winery in Soquel called it the "worst of times" followed by the "best of times."

"2012 was a real turn-around year," Bargetto said, explaining that 2009, 2010 and 2011 were all "rough," but it was 2011 — with its cold and wet spring — that was the real "painful one."

Wine grape plants are setting their fruit in April and May, and cold and wet weather can spell disaster for growers.

"Cold and wet is bad," said Dave Moulton, president of the Wine Growers Association and owner of Burrell Vineyards &

Winery in Los Gatos.

But in 2012, Moulton said, "Everything lined up," resulting in the best year for quality grapes in all of California for the past 50 years.

"Everyone saw more grapes than they thought they could get, and the taste and quality are way off scale," Moulton said, adding customers currently getting a taste of their 2012 chardonnay and pinot noir are left almost speechless.

"Most people just say 'wow' — that pretty much describes what they are putting in their mouth," said Moulton. "To taste this good this young is incredible."

Bargetto called what happened in 2012 a "trifecta" of good fortune. There was no rain in the spring, weather was moderate and prices went up. A few record hot days at the end of September and beginning of October, just before the pinot noir harvest, were not ideal, but overall, 2012 was a great year.

"We had above-average production, good clean fruit — disease free for the most part — and rising prices, too," said Bargetto.

Bargetto attributes the rise in price to a couple factors. A short supply of wine grapes from previous years has made wineries eager to buy, and after five years of the Great Recession, the economy appears to be on the mend.

Access the crop report online at: www.agdept.com