

Agriculture

2005 agricultural production drops \$30 million from 2004's record-breaking \$418 million

By TOM RAGAN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The total gross production value of agricultural commodities in Santa Cruz County came to \$418 million for 2005, a 6.5 percent decrease from 2004, when the sum reached a record \$448 million, according to the annual Santa Cruz County

WATSONVILLE

Agricultural Crop and Livestock

Report released Wednesday.

As usual, strawberries led the way, accounting for nearly \$129 million in value from the farm gate to the grocery stores. That's a 34 percent decrease from the nearly \$195 million that strawberries fetched in 2004.

And in somewhat of a surprise, the second cash crop in the county, raspberries, netted \$112 million, an 11 percent increase over the \$101 million in 2004.

Great weather for raspberries and a consistently flooded market of strawberries were cited as significant factors in what amounted to a reversal in roles between the two crops.

County Agricultural Commissioner Dave Moeller downplayed the overall \$30 million decrease between 2004 and 2005, saying the net worth in 2004 was "exceptionally high" in the history of the county.

"I'm not alarmed," said Moeller. "It just shows you that the market can have a profound effect on the

value of a crop, even when production is very, very good. It's just one of those things over which you sometimes don't have much control, but the industry is still strong. I mean, over \$400 million is nothing to sneeze at."

Each year, the report is released by the county's Agricultural Commissioner's Office after a three-month confidential survey of dozens and dozens of growers. They account for the roughly 20,000 acres in production in Santa Cruz County — from the strawberry fields to the apple orchards to the grapes in the vineyards to the winter greens like lettuce, brussels sprouts and cauliflower.

Santa Cruz County may be the second smallest county in the

state, but the agricultural industry has long been considered the largest industry in the county — and Watsonville, the hub, is known worldwide for the produce it generates in the foggy and cool Central Coast climate.

"We've got this new variety (of raspberry) out. It's called 'Mara-

villa,'" and it's really popular," said Higinio Ramirez, production manager of Aptos Berry Farms, which buys from Watsonville-based Driscoll Strawberry Associates Inc.

And newer varieties, said Ramirez, are usually key to a more profitable season.

Apple orchards remain on

the decline and are giving way to either development or berry farms.

Contact Tom Ragan at
tragan@santacruzsentinel.com.