

## Local news

# Agriculture Strawberry growers optimistic

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WATSONVILLE — The berries are planted, mother nature is providing the irrigation and strawberry growers are optimistic about the 1998 harvest season.

"We are starting off with a very nice, wet year. It's great for the plants and soil," said Phil Adrian, of Driscoll Strawberry Associates. "The intermediate irrigation has been good, and we anticipate tremendous high-quality fruit."

California is the nation's leading grower of strawberries, and the Watsonville-Salinas growing district is projected to account for 46 percent of the state's production this year. Overall, the value of production in the industry totaled \$585 million in 1997.

Strawberries accounted for \$83 million of Santa Cruz County's crop value in 1997, well ahead of the No. 2 crop, iceberg lettuce,

which brought in \$24 million.

Statewide acreage, which decreased by 10 percent last season, has increased from 22,500 to 24,100 acres in 1998.

"This increase puts us back to average acreage levels," said Dave Riggs, president of the Watsonville-based California Strawberry Commission. "With the exception of 1997, California strawberry acreage has fluctuated between 23,000 and 25,000 acres over the last six seasons."

The trade group is projecting fresh volume to be slightly above 1997 levels of 74 million trays, even though more acreage is planted this season.

"Acreage increases don't always translate into significant volume increases," Riggs said. "Weather, growing conditions, pest and disease problems are the primary factors affecting per acre yield."

The average yield in the past 30

years has risen from about six tons to 25 tons per acre. Such yields result from a fruiting season that lasts from four to six months for most varieties and up to nine or 10 months for others. Strawberries are harvested virtually year-round in California. Driscoll growers just started harvesting in Oxnard last week, Adrian said.

Coastal Berry Co. General Manager Larry Galper foresees a strong season.

"I think the general level of quality of fruit in the industry is excellent. Anytime you are producing excellent fruit 12 months a year, there is demand," he said.

The most productive plants are in the state's coastal counties: Santa Cruz, Monterey, Ventura, Santa Barbara, Orange, Los Angeles and San Diego. However, the Watsonville-Salinas strawberry district is the state's leader in acreage. This year, 11,058 acres are

planted — a 5.9 percent jump over 1997.

"We are cautiously optimistic," said Teresa Thorne, a spokesman for the California Strawberry Commission.

Thorne has seen the industry go through back-to-back turbulent seasons, where food-borne illnesses were incorrectly linked to California-grown strawberries. Growers felt the impact, as fewer acres were planted and profits dipped.

The 10 percent acreage loss in 1997 can be attributed to the food-borne illness from the year before. In Texas, health officials warned that California-grown strawberries were the source of a little-known parasite known as cyclospora, which triggers diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting and sometimes a low-grade fever. Over a two-week period between June and July in 1996, the strawberry industry suffered \$30 million in losses from the decline in sales.

### 1998 strawberry acreage trends

Statewide acreage has increased 7.4 percent in 1998 according to the California Strawberry Commission's annual acreage survey. Here is a breakdown, by growing district, with total acreage estimated at slightly over 24,000 acreages.

By District	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	Chge	% Chng
Orange/San Diego	2,437	2,324	2,495	2,381	2,870	439	18.4%
% state	10.5%	9.9%	9.9%	10.6%	11.7%		10.3%
Oxnard	4,449	4,462	5,100	5,218	5,776	558	10.7%
% state	19.1%	18.9%	20.2%	23.2%	23.9%		3.1%
Santa Maria	5,026	5,027	5,063	3,763	3,778	15	0.4%
% state	21.6%	21.3%	20.1%	16.7%	15.6%		-6.5%
Watsonville	10,619	10,941	11,712	10,446	11,058	612	5.9%
% state	45.7%	46.4%	46.4%	46.4%	45.8%		-1.4%
San Joaquin	725	819	875	700	732	32	4.6%
% state	3.1%	3.5%	3.5%	3.1%	3.0%		-2.6%
<b>State total</b>	<b>23,256</b>	<b>23,573</b>	<b>25,245</b>	<b>22,508</b>	<b>24,163</b>	<b>1,655</b>	<b>7.4%</b>

Last March, tainted frozen berries grown in Mexico, not fresh berries, were blamed for carrying hepatitis A. The strawberries wound up in school lunches in Michigan, sickening more than 200

children and teachers. Frozen or fresh, it didn't matter, and local sales took another hit.

Typically, the Central Coast season begins in late March or early April.