

ANNUAL REPORT VALUES 2013 HARVEST AT \$600M

Agriculture: Strawberries remain top crop; Brussels sprouts post record year



SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

A farmworker cuts furrows in a field north of Santa Cruz Wednesday.

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WATSONVILLE » Santa Cruz County harvested nearly \$600 million in crops in 2013, breaking the previous year's record by \$33 million.

Strawberries continued their long reign as the top agricultural commodity, according to a report released Tuesday by Agricultural Commissioner MaryLou Nicoletti. But vegetable production grew by the greatest margins last year, and the report also makes clear the increasing importance of organic farming in the county's mix of crops.

The report highlights the county's global reach, as well, with exports to a slew of countries, from Australia to Zambia.

"As the economy improves, people are buying more fruits and vegetables," said Nicoletti.

"Agriculture remains a good, viable economic engine in our community."

Berries brought in \$390 million, accounting for 65 percent of the county's agricultural gross value. The value of the strawberry crop grew 5 percent, raspberries, the county's second most valuable crop, 6 percent.

Consumers showed a taste for vegetables, as well, especially Brussels sprouts. Despite a slight dip in acreage from 2012, the value of the crop grew 55 percent to gross \$14.6 million thanks to better yields and higher prices.

"It was our best year ever, the once in a lifetime you hold onto," said grower Steve Bonadelli.

He said restaurants and cooking shows have contributed to the growing popularity of Brussels sprouts, as has awareness of their health benefits.

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A newly planted field south of Davenport is irrigated Wednesday.

TOP 10 CROPS

Strawberries: \$201.8 million
Raspberries: \$152.2 million
Nursery stock: \$74.1 million
Vegetables: \$41.8 million
Blackberries: \$33.9 million
Cut flowers/greens: \$17.8 million

Lettuce: \$14.6 million
Brussels sprouts: \$14.5 million
Apples: \$11.9 million
Livestock/Animal Products: \$6.9 million
Source: 2013 Santa Cruz County Crop Report

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efits. At an annual produce trade show, sprouts and kale were the superstars, he said.

Leaf lettuce also did well county-wide. Though yields were down, acreage and prices were up to fuel a 52 percent increase in value. Overall, the vegetable crop rose 28 percent compared to 2012.

"There's definitely been a move away from canned

and frozen to fresh (vegetables), and compounding that people are moving beyond fresh to organic fresh," said Dick Peixoto, owner of Lakeside Organic Gardens.

Though figures weren't available to compare organic production year over year, the sector has blossomed during the past decade.

In 2004, the county agricultural commissioner reported the sector brought in \$18 million. This year, organic production was estimated to be a \$90 million

Online: To View the 2013 Santa Cruz County Crop report, visit SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM and click on the story

business, involving 22 percent of harvested acreage in the county.

Peixoto, a pioneer in the field in the Pajaro Valley, said even conventional growers are venturing into the organic world.

"Before it was just kind of thought of as a fringe type of business," he said. "Now a lot of people are looking at it as a necessary component to a diversified

operation."

County crops are exported to 20 countries on every continent, according to the report. But Nicoletti said the vast majority of exports are to Japan, Canada and Mexico.

She said the nursery industry, valued at \$74 million, exports to some of the more exotic locations, such as Africa.

Nicoletti said the values reported are gross amounts, tallied without subtracting production costs so they don't reflect what growers earn.