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*This Year Passable, But Next Year...*

# Drought Hurting SC Agriculture

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So there was a rain shortage last winter and that was followed by spring and summer heat and now you are wondering good and loud: "Gee, I wonder how the crops are doing?"

Good question.

Last year, after all, the county's diverse agricultural crops brought in some \$69.3 million, according to John Simmen, the county's agricultural commissioner.

And that income was only around \$6 million more than it takes to operate the public school system countywide this year, UCSC and the County Office of Education excepted.

So it's a pretty important question, fiscally as well as nutritionally and environmentally.

Answer: the crops are doing pretty well.

Some 30 to 40 per cent of the bush berries were burned and shrivelled by the early summer heat, according to Ron Taylor, director of the University Extension Agricultural Services.

And heat also burned and discolored young apples, especially Newtown Pippins, Simmen reports.

And the drought has created problems and extra expenses for growers, especially for those who work unirrigable croplands and pasturelands, Simmen said.

Still, the farmers, ranchers, processors and workers are beginning to think they'll get through this year reasonably well despite one of the worst local droughts of modern times.

At the same time, though, there is general agreement with Joseph Crosetti of the great J. J. Crosetti Co. of Watsonville (growers and processors) that next year will be mighty tough for many if the drought continues.

"If it's dry this winter," Crosetti said, "hold onto your hat."

Crosetti said on the current crop situation: "We probably did not lose too many apples. There were some losses, but these are of a minor nature, the apples just seemed to stop growing. They are coming in smaller because the early heat was too much. If we had had the early heat in August we would

have had a real burn.

"I'd guess that the apple growers who really suffered were those who don't have the water to irrigate. We usually do this once a season and this year we had to do it twice. People who have hillside orchards without water are having very, very small fruit."

Ruben Rueda, controller for the Elwin R. Mann Corp. in Watsonville said of the apple situation:

"At this point we do have some burn on trees and the overall quality is not as good as in the past. It is still pretty hard to assess the impact of the early heat. Some orchards are having heavier crops, some lighter. We have to water longer, that's for sure. I would guess our costs are up some 15 to 20 per cent.

Rueda indicated real assessments of the impact of drought and heat will be possible after August. He said the McIntosh and Gravenstein apples will be picked the last of this month.

Apples last year brought in \$13,386,000 on a yield of 110,080 tons from 7,086 bearing acres countywide, Simmen reports.

Lettuce is doing all right, Crosetti said, but he pointed out that this is an irrigable crop that actually benefits at the beginning of the season from dry weather. "Lack of rain lets us plant more," Crosetti said, "in February, March and April."

But financially speaking, that's not necessarily good for the growers, because when the yield is up the price is bad, Crosetti noted.

But Crosetti did note also, in general, that some wells are dropping and that conditions for those without a good water supply are far from ideal.

Grapes?

Alonzo Bargetto of Bargetto Winery said: "The full effects of the heat and dry weather won't be known for a while longer.

"The pinot noir grape is doing very well. The white grapes appear to be doing well, too.

"In fact, there don't seem to be any bad signs in the Santa Cruz County areas we buy from."

Harvesting for the winery is from

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late September to early November, Bargetto said.

But he pointed out this crop is small in the county, and in a 1975 report Simmen said that 95 tons were grown on 100 acres and had a value of \$28,000.

Berries?

Berry crops last year had a local value of \$10,533,000, but of this \$9,270,000 was earned by strawberries. Some 17,720 tons were grown on 925 acres, Simmen's report says.

How's the strawberry situation?

"It's pretty good," reports Joe Sanchez, manager of the Pajaro Valley Strawberry Growers Assn. "We have noticed a difference in the peaks the growers are having, but generally things look fine. We have irrigation systems so the plants get water. But some wells are pretty low, there's no doubt about that. If we have a dry winter this year there will be some real trouble, though."

Another important industry, nursery crops, appears to be holding its own.

Pat Antonelli of the Antonelli Begonia Gardens in Capitola, for example, said: "So far we are in pretty good shape. But we have our own well. In fact, when the city water shortage

was announced we turned off our connection to the city water system. I don't see any problems here."

Worth Brown of the Brown Bulb Ranch in Capitola also reported no problems with water, but he said that people without their own wells could have problems and he said problems for well-owners could be in the offing next year if the drought continues.

Nursery crops here last year were valued as follows: \$7,756,000 for bulbs and other plants from 215 acres; \$377,000 for Christmas tree yields from 495 acres; and \$7,806,000 from cut flowers from 294 acres.

On the county's north coast it is still too early to determine how the Brussels sprouts ranchers have fared. They ran into watering problems which have now been solved by a staggered watering schedule worked out with the City of Santa Cruz.

The plants have been topped and next week final watering will begin. Picking will start around Aug. 15 and continue to around Jan. 15, according to Ralph Moceo of the Moceo organization in Santa Cruz.

Moceo said, "I am sure the crop will be off some because of a lot of heat and a lack of water. The plants are not used to that much heat."

Moceo said that extra costs of any kind add to the financial load, and he said that with wells running low ranchers have had to buy city water and costs are therefore higher.

"I estimate there will be 400 to 500 acres off this year," Moceo said.

Last year, the Brussels sprouts brought in \$4,880,000 on a yield of 16,000 tons from 3,070 acres.

For this year in general, then, Simmen said the problems are there but not truly serious except in the pasturelands.

"The cattle and pastures are badly hurt," Simmen said. "Because of rain shortage the cattle got no forage and the seed crop for next year will be very poor. I don't know what the full result will be on next year's grasses because we rely on rain and coastal moisture for pasturage."

But the biggest concern to Simmen and all growers is what kind of water will be available next year.

"If we don't get normal rain this winter," Simmen said, "we could have some real trouble."

Therefore, rain dances for next year may be in order even though this year the agricultural situation is much better than the layman may have imagined.