

STRAWBERRIES PROVIDE \$3.4B TO STATE ECONOMY

Agriculture

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DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Strawberries are harvested along San Juan Road in Pajaro on Tuesday. The first harvest of the year began last week in our area. The California Strawberry Commission's economic impact study says the industry provides 70,000 jobs and contributes \$3.4 billion to the state.

Commission examines positive impact of Santa Cruz County's No. 1 crop

By Donna Jones
djones@santacruzsentinel.com
@DonnaJonesSCS on Twitter

WATSONVILLE » California strawberries employ 70,000 people and contribute \$3.4 billion to the state's economy each year.

That's according to "Sustaining California Communities," an economic report released Tuesday by the California Strawberry Commission.

The report comes as the harvest of Santa Cruz County's premier crop begins. More than 240,000 pounds were picked in

the Watsonville-Salinas region during the week that ended March 15.

"We want people to understand it's not just the farmers and their crews out there," said commission spokeswoman Carolyn O'Donnell. "The community is important to farmers, and farmers also realize it's important how they integrate with the community."

Nearly 90 percent of U.S.-grown strawberries come from California. Watsonville-Salinas is the top producer among the state's four strawberry regions,

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More than 240,000 pounds of strawberries were picked in Watsonville-Salinas region last week.

On the Net: To view the California Strawberry Commission report, "Sustaining California Communities," visit SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM and click on this story.

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accounting for 47 percent of the total harvest of nearly 1.8 billion pounds in 2013, according to commission statistics.

The industry spends about \$2 billion on wages, equipment and supplies, land and taxes, the report says. It generates another \$1.4 billion indirectly through, for example, the restaurants and grocery stores that cater to agricultural workers and the police and teachers funded by the estimated \$108 million the industry pays in taxes.

And it's not just the berry-producing counties on the Central Coast and Southern California. Nurseries in the northern part of the state produce 2 billion plants for transplant in the strawberry fields.

The industry is labor-intensive, requiring a large pool of

workers to handpick berries. But mechanics, researchers, educators and forklift drivers are among the thousands who work in berry-related jobs.

The report doesn't assess costs associated with the industry, such as subsidized housing for low-wage workers. O'Donnell said that would require a more comprehensive and expensive report. But she pointed to the industry's charitable giving. The report notes as an example, the \$2 million in scholarships awarded by the commission to the children of farmworkers since 1994.

The report says for every 97 cents invested in a crop, farmers take home an average of 3 cents, and sometimes fail to break-even.

Growers say increasing costs and regulations put more pressure on the bottom line.

"Everything has gotten tougher," said Pajaro Valley grower Edward Ortega. "All



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Containers of packed strawberries are stacked Tuesday.

our costs are higher, and the sales price is not going up to meet the higher costs."

Because California strawberries are grown mainly for the fresh market and have to ship within 36 hours of harvest, growers can't hold onto fruit until they get the price they want, O'Donnell said.

Then, there's the weather. In 2013, Oxnard strawberry growers took a beating when cool temperatures delayed

the harvest and resulted on lesser quality fruit that had to be sold at a discount for processing, O'Donnell said.

Despite the narrow margins and uncertainty year to year, farmers' passion for growing keeps them in the business, O'Donnell said.

"They're always thinking, always trying to play out all the scenarios so they can plant strawberries another year," she said.

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