

Almond output threatened by drought

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By [Reed Fujii](#)

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Federal estimates that California could produce nearly 2 billion pounds of almonds this year comes with a big maybe, spelled D-R-O-U-G-H-T.

The U.S. National Agricultural Statistics Service last week pegged this fall's nut haul at 1.95 billion pounds, based on a survey of growers statewide.

That would be down 2.5 percent from the 2 billion pounds harvested in 2013, as well as the record 2.03 billion-pound crop of 2011.

But an industry expert and San Joaquin County growers said Monday the lack of water due to near-record drought conditions could take an uncertain toll.

"Whatever the crop is, it will be reduced by the effect of deficit irrigation or the (total) lack of water in some cases," said Dave Baker, director of grower relations for Blue Diamond, the giant almond growers cooperative.

He said the federal estimate was a reasonable starting point but continued: "What's going to happen from this point forward is anyone's guess."

Certainly, farmers are scrambling to secure water for their orchards, drilling new wells and tapping other sources where possible, Baker said. "But you're going to start to see come June more effect of the water situation, and it'll rear its head in various areas throughout the state."

While Baker offered no guess as to the drought's impact, one Ripon almond grower, Rick Veldstra, made a prediction: "The (federal crop) estimate sounds reasonable, but ... you can guarantee the crop will be less," he said.

"If you go up and down (Interstate) 5, there's a lot of orchards that just got taken out," Veldstra said.

"A lot of orchards got taken out in just the last six weeks, and we don't know the impact of the drought," he said. "A lot of trees are not going to get the water they need."

Almonds are a leading export product for California and one of the top cash crops in San Joaquin County. The county harvest in 2012 was valued at \$300 million.

Blue Diamond officials reported: "There is strong demand across global markets as we move into the summer months" and that almond sales remain "at a robust pace."

Given that demand, Baker said, "We need the 1.95 billion pounds. ... We can use it all."

That's good news for another Ripon almond grower, Kevin Fondse, who reported having a secure supply of water for his orchards.

"I've got a good crop; I've got a super crop," he said. "It was terrific bloom we had this year."

But he, too, was concerned about the drought's impact on other growing areas in the state.

"The worse part of this whole drought thing ... is the trickle-down effect to all the people who work in agriculture," he said. "For the people who don't have a job, those are the ones that really get hit."

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