

Drought-defying tomato harvest breaks California record

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Not even an epic drought could stop the familiar convoy of agricultural trucks hurtling down Central Valley freeways this year, brimming with freshly harvested tomatoes.

Defying the state's devastating water shortage, California farmers produced a record tomato crop. The harvest came in at an estimated 14 million tons of processing tomatoes. Those are the type used to make sauce, salsa and other products, and represent about 96 percent of all the tomatoes grown in California.

In a year when most commodities saw declines in production, the tomato crop was 16 percent larger than last year. It surpassed the old record of 13.3 million tons harvested in 2009, according to the California Tomato Growers Association.

"It's remarkable, simply remarkable that tomatoes weren't negatively impacted," said David Goldhamer, an emeritus water management specialist with the University of California Cooperative Extension.

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The bountiful crop didn't happen by accident. Fearful of possible shortages, tomato processors agreed to pay a record price to growers: \$83 a ton, up from \$70 a year ago. That prompted many farmers throughout the state, home to more than 95 percent of the nation's tomatoes, to dedicate a greater percentage of their land and water to tomatoes. An additional 30,000 acres of tomatoes were planted compared to a year ago.

"We wound up with a pretty strong tomato price," said Darrin Williams, who raises a variety of crops in the Arbuckle area. "It got the crop grown."

While statistics aren't yet available on fresh tomatoes, like the kinds sold in supermarkets, it appears they enjoyed a strong harvest as well, at least in Northern California. Jim Boyce, owner of Produce Express wholesalers in Sacramento, said he saw an approximately 25 percent surge in supplies from growers within a 100-mile radius. Similar to the market for processing tomatoes, prices for fresh were higher than a year ago, he said.

"We had an ongoing plethora of tomatoes," Boyce said.

In Sacramento, tomato farming endures as a link to the region's agricultural heritage, as well as the recent trend in farm-to-fork dining. While Fresno County is far and away the state's largest tomato producer, the greater Sacramento area still abounds with tomato farms and processing plants. Campbell Soup Co., for instance, continues to operate processing plants in Dixon and Stockton even though the company's Sacramento factory, which made soup, V8 juice and other finished products, was shuttered last year.

With tomatoes the 10th most valuable farm commodity in California, the healthy harvest came as a relief to many in the industry.

"It turned out to be right on budget, just what we wanted," said Chris Rufer, chief executive of The Morning Star Co. of Woodland, which produces paste and diced tomatoes for such corporate customers as Kraft and Frito-Lay.

"Everything's OK," said Rufer, who had openly worried earlier this year about possible shortages. "Plenty of pizza."

But not as much wheat, rice and other commodities. For many growers, the tomato harvest came at the expense of

other crops. It was a simple financial calculation of squeezing the maximum profit out of scarce water supplies.

“We can make more money per gallon of water on a pound of tomatoes than anything else,” said Winters farmer Bruce Rominger, chairman of the Tomato Growers Association. In order to concentrate on tomatoes, Rominger fallowed some of the land that would have been planted in rice, alfalfa and sunflowers.

The increase in tomato production was a rarity in California this year. Most crops experienced a smaller harvest. The main exceptions were a handful of tree crops, such as pistachios and walnuts, where growers had little choice but to keep watering in order to protect their orchards.

“Other than that, just about everything is going to be down ... at least a little bit or a lot,” said Dave Kranz, spokesman for the California Farm Bureau Federation. “Tomatoes are the exception to the rule.”

Even some of the tree crops suffered. The almond crop, which has been one of the great California growth stories in recent years, shrank by about 7 percent. Pistachio production did grow by nearly 10 percent, to 514 million pounds, thanks to record plantings. But the severe restrictions on water supplies left the pistachio crop well short of the 700 million pounds predicted a few months ago.

With tomatoes, however, just about everything went well. Farmers were able to avoid a repeat of last year, when a disease called the beet curly top virus cut production by an estimated 1 million tons, said Mike Montna of the growers association.

This year, growing conditions were ideal, notwithstanding the drought. Temperatures were relatively mild, and the lack of early-fall rains enabled farmers to extend the harvest deep into October.

“It allowed for every acre that was planted to get harvested,” said Daniel Sroufe, vice president of operations at Pacific Coast Producers, a fruit and vegetable processor based in Lodi.

Another factor in tomatoes' favor: They're not a particularly thirsty crop. Tomatoes can be grown with about half as much water as other high-value crops such as pistachios or almonds. What's more, many tomato farmers have invested heavily in efficient drip-irrigation systems in recent years.

Nonetheless, farmers and processors say it will be difficult to duplicate this year's production record if 2015 brings another year of drought.

“If our lack of rainfall continues ... there won't be pulling a rabbit out of the hat again,” Sroufe said.

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