

Year in Review: Agriculture

Published on 12/31/2014 - 10:56 am

Written by Gabriel Dillard, Managing Editor

[0 Comments](#)



Local nurseries remained busy this year despite the drought. Almonds, such as these young trees in Fresno County, were a popular choice. For all the attention the California drought has brought to the San Joaquin Valley, local growers undoubtedly find themselves in the same situation they were in this time last year, if not worse.

National media shined a spotlight on the drought in 2014, leading to state and federal hearings and even President Barack Obama's first Fresno visit in February.

But with the exception of voter passage of the \$7.5 billion water bond in November, little has been done to actually bring more supplies to Valley growers that need it most. Water pumping out of the Delta is still restricted, with area growers receiving an unprecedented 0-percent allocation from the Central Valley Project.

Recent rains are encouraging, especially to the state's ranchers, but there isn't much optimism among growers that 2015 will be any better. Many think it will get worse.

The result of short supplies and regulatory restrictions has been a spike in prices of water in the open market. The price has increased as much as 1,000 percent to \$2,200 an acre-foot. The price led to a number of sales and transfers across the state.

Crop reports for 2013 were released this year, with all counties but Fresno marking an increase in production value. Most believe Fresno County's crop value will continue to decline in the next couple of years.

Fresno County's 2013 crop value was \$6.4 billion, a drop of 2.2 percent that put the county below Tulare County's \$7.8 billion value for the first time in more than a decade.

Madera County announced a 9-percent increase in its 2013 crop value to a total of \$1.89 billion. Kings County set an all-time high with its 2013 crop value of \$2.26 billion.

On the labor front, the battle between the United Farm Workers (UFW) and Gerawan Farms continued to roil this year over whether the tree-fruit grower's 3,000 farmworkers would be represented by the union. A state administrative hearing on allegations of unfair labor charges against Gerawan was held in the fall. Protesters on both sides making their voices heard, and both sides have lodged accusations of intimidation.

More than a year ago Gerawan workers had an opportunity to vote on whether or not to be represented by the UFW. The results of the election will likely not be known for months as various lawsuits and court hearings wind through the legal system.

Another local company has taken proactive steps on behalf of its employees. Chowchilla's Agriland Farming Company in October signed a farm labor agreement with the U.S. Department of Labor. It is the first farm management company in the Valley to sign such an agreement, which applies to roughly 175 employees. Under the agreement, Agriland promises to self-monitor its operations for compliance with the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Migrant and Seasonal Worker Protection Act.

The future of farm animal genetic research in Fresno County got a boost this fall when a group called The World Heritage Animal Genomic Repository-Veterinary Institute announced plans to open a facility in the Sanger river bottom area to conserve the genetic information of 4,000 livestock breeds. The first phase is expected to cost \$11.78 million and the facility could open in the next two years.

When it comes to crops, there were clear winners and losers in 2014. Field crops suffered as more growers concentrated on irrigating their permanent plantings including nuts like pistachios and almonds.

The value of such crops has led to a shift in crop planting, with many giving up grapes in favor of nuts.

The payoff is evident. A University of California report released earlier this month revealed that almonds create about 104,000 jobs and generate more than \$21 billion in gross revenue for California. That represents a contribution of about \$11 billion into the total Gross State Product of around \$2 trillion.

About 97,000 of those almond jobs were created in the Central Valley region.

The citrus industry started the year off on the wrong foot with the February announcement that an early December freeze cost California citrus about \$441 million. The danger presented by the Asian citrus psyllid brought little by way of relief. The pest, which can carry a disease that destroys citrus fruit and trees, was recently found in Madera County. Widespread quarantines to contain the pest are in effect in Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties, among others.

[inShare](#)