

Port slowdown hurting Kings County farms

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Reporter



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Apolina Fonseca, The Sentinel

A tree shaker harvests walnuts last summer at an orchard on Flint Avenue near Hanford.

Oakland

Almonds, pistachios, walnuts said to be affected

February 10, 2015 6:00 am •

A bitter dispute between dockworkers and port owners in Oakland is affecting Kings County negatively, according to growers who depend on Oakland and other West Coast ports to get their product to buyers.

Dockyard employers are claiming that the workers are deliberately slowing down the unloading/loading of ships at

Oakland and other ports. The employers, who have already refused to pay for night shifts, are threatening a lockout.

The workers are represented by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. The union condemned the night-shift cutback and the threatened lockout.

The union blames the West Coast container congestion crisis on structural problems with the shipping supply chain.

On Monday, the ports fully reopened after two days during which no ships were unloaded. The weekend hiatus left a backlog of containers on the dock.

The two sides are negotiating a contract, but have failed to reach agreement on a number of key issues despite the involvement of a federal mediator.

The biggest effect is being felt in almonds, 80 percent of which are exported. Kings County grows about 20,000 acres of almonds that yield an annual crop worth more than \$100 million.

“We can’t get paid for our nuts, because we can’t get them delivered,” said Pete Hanse, who grows 400 acres of walnuts and 120 acres of almonds northwest of Hanford.

Hanse said he had about \$1.5 million worth of nuts sitting idle at various ports.

“I’m kind of afraid that our governor is not going to take any action, and our president is not going to take any action,” he said. “I just hope we get it resolved.”

Meanwhile, Mary Aceves, national accounts manager for Kings County pistachio grower/processor Nichols Farms, said the company has 12 containers sitting on the dock in Oakland, waiting to be placed on a ship for export.

Aceves said the total value of the delayed shipments is \$1.4 million. She said that about 15 percent of Nichols Farms’ buyers were being negatively affected.

Aceves said that if the dispute drags on, it could result in layoffs at the company’s Kings County processing plant and lost jobs in the field.

“It’s a very big issue,” she said. “If this doesn’t straighten out, we’re going to lose a lot of business.”

The problem as also struck a chord at Crisp California Walnuts, the Stratford-based processor. About 50 percent of California walnuts go to other countries.

“The walnut industry is having a tough time,” said President Jim Crisp. “Frankly, I think our government need to step in.”

In 2013, Kings County produced a 14,000-acre harvest of walnuts worth \$98.3 million, according to the Kings County Crop Report.

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