

Feds forecast strong almond crop despite drought

By John
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The federal government is projecting a 2015 almond crop of 1.85 billion pounds in California, short of the record but still strong considering the drought.

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- By the numbers

1.85 billion: Pounds of almonds projected to be harvested in California this year

2.03 billion: Largest crop on record, in 2011

\$3.50: Average price per pound received by growers in 2014

97 cents: Average price in 2000

773,806: Acres statewide

Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service

- *Almond growers buoyed by a good 2015 crop are buying water to irrigate.*
- *Some almond growers have experienced cutbacks, but others are using new techniques to gain better yield.*

The federal government on Tuesday projected an almond crop of 1.85 billion pounds in California this year, short of the record but still strong considering the drought.

The [estimate](#) is down 1% from last year and 9% from the record harvest of 2.03 billion pounds in 2011.

The figure, announced at the Modesto headquarters of the Almond Board of California, suggests that growers are stretching what water they have to produce a food in high demand around the world.

“I think it’s a very positive number,” said Barret Arakelian, director of grower relations at Del Rio Nut Co. in Livingston. “It should keep prices stable.”

Those prices have been around \$4 per pound to the grower in recent months, about double the 2011 average and four times the going rate in 2000.

This has prompted growers to pay what it takes to irrigate, including increased pumping of groundwater and the purchase of river water from other areas if it is available. Some farmers also have annual crops that can be fallowed during drought so the water can help keep almonds and other permanent plantings alive.

The estimate was based on a telephone survey of 328 growers by the National Agricultural Statistics Service last month. It will release a July 1 update based on nut counts and measurements in sample orchards. The harvest will start in August.

California produces about 80% of the world’s almonds, most from the San Joaquin Valley.

The drought, now four years old, has brought especially sharp cutbacks in irrigation deliveries. Some growers have provided less-than-optimal water for almond trees, which reduces yields, or have taken out entire orchards.

These losses are balanced by improved farming techniques in other areas, said Bob Curtis, associate director of agricultural affairs at the Almond Board. They include closer tree spacing in new orchards, better pruning of limbs, drip and other efficient irrigation methods, and sensors that show when watering is needed.

“Our new acreage will have higher yields per acre because of these production practices,” Curtis said.

The almond industry has drawn criticism from people who do not think so much water should go to a crop that is mostly exported. Backers note that the nuts are a healthy form of protein and fat and the income from abroad helps drive the region’s economy.

Doug Flohr, the federal statistician who unveiled the estimate, said the 2015 crop was aided by good weather for pollination in February and March. Surveyed growers said pest concerns have increased from last year but are still “manageable.”

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