

California Drought Changes What Farmers Grow



Gary and Debbie Broomell pose behind a sign on their ranch in San Diego County.

Lesley McClurg / Capital Public Radio

Water scarcity is driving farmers to plant different crops. Growers are switching to more profitable -- less thirsty fruits, vegetables and nuts.

Nowhere is this more true than San Diego County where the water prices are some of the highest in the state.

Billowing orange and grapefruit trees shade [Triple B Ranches](#) winery and vineyard near Escondido. The rural setting is quaint and bucolic. The tasting room is a converted kitchen festooned with country knickknacks.

Debbie Broomell runs the boutique winery with her father Gary Broomell. Winemaking is relatively new for the Broomell's. For three generations, the Broomell's have grown citrus. But, it's been hard to stay profitable growing oranges.



A bottle of the 2012 viognier from Triple B Ranches. Lesley McClurg / Capital Public Radio

"With the water problems... we're looking for something that uses a little less water and grapes seem to be it," says Gary Broomell.

The price of water in San Diego County more than doubled in the last six years and vineyards require 25 percent less water than orange groves.



Gary Broomell and his daughter, Debbie Broomell in their orange grove on Triple B Ranches. Lesley McClurg / Capital Public Radio

As a result, the number of wineries in the area tripled in recent years.

But, the savings might not be enough to ensure survival for the Broomells. Debbie points to a shallow well in the middle of some grape vines.

"Dad's been cranking it down because the water table's been dropping," she says. "We're keeping our fingers crossed that [the wells] can keep producing through the summer."

Gary throws up his hands to the sky.

"We still got July, August, September, October. Ya know?" he says.

If the drought doesn't end soon, Gary says they'll likely have to pull out of citrus altogether. He says he's looking into persimmons as another alternative.

Eric Larson from the [California Farm Bureau](#) drives through the San Pasqual Valley to point out other trends driven by the drought. He points to a 400-acre lemon grove that has been abandoned. It's one of many barren hillsides.

Citrus and avocados have been the two leading crops in north San Diego County. But, several thousand acres of citrus and about 10,000 acres of avocados have been taken out of production because farmers can't afford to irrigate.

But, like the Broomells -- not all farmers are giving up.

Farmers are switching to nurseries or planting unusual crops like pomegranates. Larson points to a field of dragonfruit.

"Uses very, very little water," says Larson. "I guess I could best describe it as a cactus with fruit on it. They [farmers] are getting a lot of money per pound."

He says it's important to remember that not long ago avocados were a specialty crop.

"And, it was hard to sell those things. They were called alligator pears. People didn't know what they were," explains Larson. "They got two to three cents a pound for them. Then as the Hispanic population grew in the United States, and brought this taste for avocados with them, and the proliferation for Mexican restaurants -- all of the sudden Americans can't get enough avocados."

The search for the ideal drought tolerant crop is nothing new according to UC Davis economist [Daniel Sumner](#). He says markets and weather have always driven what farmers plant.

"The context is that what we produce in California has been changing for two hundred years," explains Sumner. "You go back 140 years ago California was the second biggest wheat state in the country. The Central Valley was dry land wheat farming. We were second to Kansas."

As late as the 1980's California was a leading cotton producer at 1.5 million acres, this year's cotton crop is predicted to be about a tenth of that. In today's market Sumner says cotton farmers can't make ends meet, so they're switching to almonds, pistachios, or wine grapes.

Sumner expects dry times and high water prices to continue to push California's farmland away from annual crops and pasture to higher value orchards and vineyards.

This year's rice crop is predicted to be thirty percent below normal, whereas the almond crop is expected to be at an all-time high.



Grape vines in northern San Diego County. Lesley McClurg / Capital Public Radio