

# Kings County reports 9% boost in annual farm income

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Higher crop prices, a boost in yields and more acres pushed Kings County to a new crop value record of \$2.4 billion in 2014, an increase of 9% over the previous year.

Crops posting the biggest gains were milk, processing tomatoes and nuts. Tim Niswander, Kings County's agricultural commissioner, said he was slightly surprised at the rise in values in light of the state's ongoing drought.

"Some of this comes down to simple supply and demand," said Niswander, who presented the [annual report to the county Board of Supervisors](#) on Tuesday. "And several crops were very much in demand, despite the drought."

Milk remained the county's top crop, generating a value of \$970 million.

Hanford dairy farmer Gino Giacomazzi said 2014 will go down in the record books for yielding the highest California milk prices in history. Several years ago, the region's dairy operators were suffering through a period of record low prices and high feed costs.

"The dairy industry tends to go through three-year cycles of boom and bust," Giacomazzi said. "And 2014 was one of those boom years."

At its peak last year, milk prices were topping \$22 per hundred pounds of milk. By comparison, milk prices in 2009 — one of the dairy industry's worst years — hovered around \$9 per hundred pounds of milk.

Also increasing in acreage and price were nut crops. Almonds, walnuts and pistachios continued their growth trend. Almond acreage rose 11.5 % last year to 19,422 acres for a value of \$154 million, while pistachios acres grew by 5% to 19,187 acres and a value of \$136 million. Walnuts grew 3.5% to 14,420 acres and a value of \$94 million.

Niswander said the drought triggered an increase in some field crops, like alfalfa silage, but declines in others, including cotton. Driving the rise is silage acreage was the demand for feed among livestock owners. Cattle ranchers were among those who had to buy supplemental feed because the region's rangelands were sparsely covered with vegetation. As a result, Kings County saw a 206% increase in alfalfa silage acreage, jumping from 2,101 in 2013 to 6,432 last year.

The drought and unfavorable weather took their toll on cotton, wheat grain and cherries. Although cotton remained the county's No. 2 crop, valued at \$232 million, the crop's acreage declined 27%, due largely to a shortage of water. A lack of cold nights spelled trouble for cherry farmers, whose trees did not produce very well. The county's cherry crop plummeted 43% in value.

Processing tomatoes, one of the Valley's major crops, did well for Kings County growers in 2014. New irrigation techniques boosted production and a healthy demand benefited prices. The value of processing tomatoes rose 50% to \$146 million.

Kings was the first central San Joaquin Valley county to report its 2014 crop values; the rest are expected later this summer.

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