

Almond crop projection drops a bit

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A federal agency Wednesday reduced slightly its projection of the state's almond crop this year – 1.8 billion pounds rather than the 1.85 billion estimated in early May.

The figure, announced at noon at the Modesto headquarters of the [Almond Board of California](#), suggests that this highly valuable crop is making it through the extreme drought.

The projection falls short of the record crop of 2.03 billion pounds in 2011, but it still would be the fifth-largest harvest on record.

“I think it's a good number for the industry,” said Dave Long, president of Hilltop Ranch, which grows and processes almonds in the Ballico area. “I think prices will stay strong for the grower.”

Long said prices likely will be \$4.45 to \$4.55 per pound for the nonpareil variety, the most prized, and \$4.25 to \$4.35 for the others. That's about triple the level of a dozen years ago.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service based the first estimate on a telephone survey of growers and the second on measurements of nuts in a sampling of orchards. The harvest will start in August up and down the Central Valley, source of about 80 percent of the world's almonds.

The industry has boomed in part thanks to research showing that almonds can protect people from heart disease, cancer and other ills. And the nuts are harvested with machines, so growers do not face the same labor shortages and costs as with hand-picked crops.

The drought has interrupted the growth in almond volume, but plenty of nuts are still being produced. Many growers are willing to pay high costs to pump groundwater, although this has raised concern about overdraft in some areas. Some are using water from lower-value annual crops that are being fallowed because of the dry conditions.

“It's definitely worth it to find water,” Long said.

The board has been responding to critics who claim that almonds use an outsized amount of water for a crop that is mostly exported. Chief Executive Officer Richard Waycott said last week that the industry has cut water use by a third in recent decades, despite the increased tonnage.

“We've made great strides in building a sustainable industry over the past 40 years,” he said.

Nearly a third of the state's almond acreage is in Stanislaus, Merced and San Joaquin counties. The region had about \$2.3 billion in gross income to growers in 2013, according to their agricultural commissioners.

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By the numbers

- **1.8 billion:** Projected pounds of almonds to be harvested in California this year
- **1.85 billion:** Earlier estimate for 2015
- **2.03 billion:** Largest crop on record, in 2011

Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service