

2015 raisin crop expected to be bigger than last year

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Despite a continued decline in acreage and a devastating drought, California's raisin grape crop is expected to be larger than last year.

But how much larger is a source of debate. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's estimates a 13 percent increase in tonnage, according to the results of its annual field survey.

The USDA, in cooperation with the California Department of Agriculture, says the industry is on track to produce 2 million tons of raisin grapes compared to 1.7 million tons last year. The survey also shows that the number of raisin grape acres has dropped to 185,000, with yields estimated at 10.8 tons per acre.

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Raisin industry leaders, however, say the crop estimate is too high.

"We think the estimate is overstated," said Glen Goto, chief executive officer of the Raisin Bargaining Association. "From what we are seeing, it may be about the same as last year."

Goto agrees that there are fewer acres of raisins in the state. California, led by the central San Joaquin Valley, is the No. 1 supplier of raisins in the U.S., but higher value crops like almonds have caused many raisin growers to pull out their vines and plant nut trees. Since 2000, raisin acreage has declined 33 percent to 185,000.

This year, raisins were farmed on 180,000 acres, a drop of 5,000 acres from the previous year. Still, the yield per acre is estimated at nearly 11 tons, up from 9.2 tons per acre the previous year.

Matthew Fidelibus, a University of California crop extension specialist, said the weather for growing grapes has been favorable, so far.

"There are a lot of grape bunches out there," Fidelibus said. "And farmers should have a decent year."

Although the drought has been challenge for some growers, many have managed to get by by pumping ground water in their vineyards.

Raisin harvest for most growers of Thompson seedless grapes is expected to begin by the end of August and into early September.

How much the raisin crop is worth this year remains to be seen. Last year, growers received \$1,775 a ton and \$1,650 the year before.

Goto, who bargains on behalf of the growers, said the process for negotiating a price for the 2015 crop has just begun.

"We have some concepts and different ideas that we are working on," Goto said.

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