

Fresno County sets record in 2014 crop report

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Fresno County agriculture set a record in 2014, with crop values reaching \$7 billion for the first time. But it wasn't enough for the county to reclaim its longtime title as California's top agricultural county.

The county's total value was just the third best in the state – behind Tulare and Kern counties – as the drought continued to drag down Fresno's overall crop production.

"Yes, we are celebrating \$7 billion in value, but that number should be \$8, \$9 or \$10 billion," said Ryan Jacobsen, Fresno County Farm Bureau chief executive officer. "It is frustrating."

Almonds were the county's top crop, grossing \$1.3 billion. Next came grapes, at \$905 million. Rounding out the top five were poultry (\$655 million), milk (\$636.5 million) and cattle and calves (\$575 million).

An estimated 250,000 acres in the county were fallowed last year because of a lack of water, said Fresno County Agricultural Commissioner Les Wright, who presented the report to the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

This was the second year in a row that Fresno County fell to No. 3. Kern County was solidly No. 2 with a crop value of \$7.5 billion in 2014. The state's new agriculture leader, Tulare County, topped \$8 billion.

The drop in ranking was not lost on Fresno County Supervisor Andreas Borgeas, who asked Wright why the county has slipped to the No. 3 spot.

"What is changing?" Borgeas said.

Wright said the drop was a result of several factors, including the drought and poor prices for some field crops. At the same time, record-high dairy prices propelled Tulare County's total values. About one-third of Tulare County's total value came from milk, which grossed \$2.5 billion last year.

"If we had water, we would be No. 1 or No. 2," Wright said.

Kern County benefited from strong table grape prices. The county is the nation's leading table grape grower. Grapes' gross value rose to \$1.7 billion in 2014.

Wright said the county saw declines in several crops, including cotton acreage that dropped 23 percent and wheat, for which growers slashed acreage 79 percent. Dry bean acreage tumbled 74 percent and lettuce fell 38 percent.

Highlights from the annual crop report showed continued growth in nut crops, including almonds and pistachios.

Pistachios have become the county's seventh-leading crop with a value of \$378 million last year. Acreage also continues to grow. From 2013 to 2014, the industry added 12,513 acres for a total of 50,387.

Richard Matoian, executive director of the Fresno-based Western Pistachio Growers, said the industry is poised for continued growth. He estimates that its current volume of 520 million pounds will double by 2020.

"God willing and with the water coming, production will grow substantially over the next number of years," Matoian said.

Almond acreage also continues to grow. Last year, almonds were farmed on 170,711 acres, up from 162,220 in 2013.

Prices have also remained solid. Although the almond-growing industry received flak from critics for the amount of water required to produce a crop, Wright said planting continues.

“We have not seen a slowdown,” he said.

Almond farmers and others have been able to keep their trees alive by pumping groundwater or buying costly surface water.

Other counties releasing crop reports included Kings County, whose value was \$2.4 billion, an increase of 9 percent. Milk was Kings County’s top commodity with a value of \$970 million. Madera County is expected to release its report in the coming weeks.

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