

Madera County's 2014 crop values hit record-high \$2.2 billion

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Strong market prices and increased production helped push Madera County's 2014 crop values to a record-high \$2.2 billion.

The 2014 gross agriculture values rose 19.5 percent over the previous year, said Stevie McNeill, Madera County agricultural commissioner.

McNeill, who presented the annual report to the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, said that in spite of a devastating drought, farmers benefited from higher dairy prices and the continued growth of the almond industry.

"This demonstrates the ability of Madera County producers to adapt and increase efficiencies while facing the ongoing drought conditions," McNeill said.

Madera County's top five crops in 2014 were: almonds, milk, grapes, pistachios and cattle & calves.

Almonds have remained the county's top crop for the fifth year in a row with a value of \$771 million. Madera County increased its acreage of almonds by 7 percent in 2014 to 106,000 acres. The crop has remained a hot commodity in the San Joaquin Valley, bolstered by steady consumer demand domestically and abroad.

"Farmers are getting out of other crops and getting into almonds because the crop is making more money," McNeill said.

Pistachios and walnut growers are also planting more trees in hopes of tapping the growing demand for nuts. Positive health claims about nut consumption has helped drive that growth.

Last year, pistachio acreage rose 6 percent to 31,000 acres and walnuts grew 11 percent to 1,900 acres, the crop report shows.

Also contributing to Madera County's record breaking year was the booming dairy industry. Last year, dairy farmers enjoyed the highest dairy prices in history. The production from the county's 43 dairies was valued at \$415 million, an increase of 28 percent from 2013.

Hardest hit by the drought were field crops, including cotton, corn, oat hay and wheat. The entire field crop category declined in acreage by four percent and nearly nine percent in revenue.

Figs, a crop that was once in decline in the central San Joaquin Valley, has made a comeback over the last decade. Acreage in Madera County grew 19 percent last year to 5,600 acres and revenue jumped 22 percent to \$19 million.

"What we are seeing is an increase in plantings of specialty figs, like the tiger fig," McNeill said. "And we are still the No. 1 fig producing county in the state."

Madera County's report, the last of the year in the central San Joaquin Valley, follows record values set in neighboring counties.

Tulare County led the state with an overall crop value of \$8 billion. Taking the No. 2 spot was Kern County with \$7.5 billion and Fresno County's overall crop value was \$7 billion. Kings County's crop value was \$2.4 billion.

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