

Walnuts remain big Kings County commodity

Seth Nidever Staff
Reporter

Almonds and pistachios have been the rock stars of the Kings County nut industry, but another tree crop has also been on the rise: walnuts.

Kings County's 2014 walnut acreage — 14,420 acres — jumped up by about 4,500 acres to almost 19,000 acres in 2015, according to Steve Schweizer, deputy agricultural commissioner.

Walnuts were the the seventh-most-valuable local crop in 2014, clocking it at a gross value of \$94.1 million, according to the Kings County Crop Report.

Kings County isn't alone: The nuts have been occupying more and more acreage statewide. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service is predicting a record California crop of 570,000 tons this year.

Most of the walnuts grown in Kings are immediately sent to large processing plants, but there is a surprisingly robust local market, according to Schweizer.

Schweizer indicated that it's not uncommon to find Kings County owners with 10 or fewer trees. Since a single tree can yield as much as 100 pounds, the smaller growers represent a lot of product that can be turned into cash.

These growers produce too little to justify sending it directly to big walnut processing plants, but they yield enough to create a thriving local market.

Licensed walnut buyers at the local level typically buy from multiple individuals, lump the product together and sell it to processors, according to Schweizer.

The local walnut industry has been lucrative enough that it has sometimes attracted bad buyers.

Large growers have reported thefts from their fields, either from people picking walnuts off the trees or scooping up the nuts while they're lying on the ground waiting to be picked up by harvesting machines.

The problem was thought to be bad enough that Kings County supervisors adopted an anti-theft ordinance for walnuts in 2013.

The ordinance requires non-processing buyers to register with the county and buy only within a set period of time; requires anybody with sacks of walnuts to have proof of ownership; and authorizes county agricultural employees and law enforcement officers to stop and check the status of anybody suspected to have illegal walnuts in their possession.

Walnuts play an important role in Kings County's gleaning economy, according to Schweizer. With permission from the grower, gleaners go through the fields and collect what's left after the harvesting machines have passed through.

"It's a huge amount of nuts," Schweizer said, adding that he really "had no idea" how many local people sold walnuts until he starting looking into the possibility of establishing an anti-theft ordinance.

Meanwhile, as the 2015 harvest finishes up, Kings County's larger walnut growers have other worries.

The California walnut crop has grown from 328,000 tons in 2007 to a record 563,000 tons in 2014, according to a report from Crain Walnut Shelling Inc.

Just as has been the case in the almond industry, the rapid growth in walnut acreage has raised fears of a price collapse, put extra pressure on groundwater supplies and forced the industry to more aggressively market the product at home and abroad.

The California Walnut Board is planning a multimedia promotional campaign to include television, print and digital advertising.

Last year's record crop was so big, it left a lot of inventory that wasn't immediately sold, according to Kings County grower Michael Miya.

That, coupled with this year's record crop forecast, has lowered prices significantly.

Miya expressed his concern that prices for the popular Chandler variety could go as low as \$1.10-\$1.20 a pound compared to an average price of about \$1.80 per pound over the last several years.

At the same time, according to grower and Kings County supervisor Doug Verboon, several walnut varieties remain popular overseas.

"In Europe, they love walnuts," he said. "They eat them around the house like snacks."

Like almonds and pistachios, walnuts have added value because of what can be done with the shells. Some countries burn walnut shells to create heat.

Miya predicted that, despite the price fluctuations, walnut acreage in Kings County and elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley will keep climbing.

"We're going to continue to have record harvests for the next few years," he said.

The reporter can be reached at sndever@hanfordsentinel.com or 583-2432. Follow him on Twitter @sndever.