

Another record year

- AGRICULTURE

SJ County's 2014 crop value up more than 8 percent — \$3.23 billion



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Walnuts planted along Highway 26 near the San Joaquin County line. RECORD FILE 2014



- By Reed Fujii
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Posted Oct. 20, 2015 at 1:46 PM

Despite California's ongoing drought, a surge in crop and commodity prices and increased plantings of key nut crops pushed San Joaquin County's agricultural production to a record \$3.23 billion in 2014, officials announced Tuesday.

That was a nearly 9 percent gain from \$2.98 billion in 2013 and the fourth year in a row San Joaquin farmers and ranchers reached a new high crop value, county Agricultural Commissioner Tim Pelican reported.

"The production has really gone down, but the prices have gone up ... on a number of commodities," he said.

The county's top three crops posted significant gains in value.

Almonds, No. 1 at \$579 million for 2014, jumped nearly 25 percent mostly because of a strong rise in prices as well as a slightly larger harvest.

Milk prices and production both increased in 2014, grabbing the No. 2 spot among the county's commodities at \$541 million, up 26 percent from 2013.

No. 3 in 2014, walnuts also experienced a significant increase in price and acreage harvested, with a total value of \$500 million, up 13 percent.

Grape acreage increased as did prices, but a smaller crop left the total value at \$481 million for 2014, down 3 percent. That ranked the vineyard fruit as the county's fourth most-valuable, after being ranked No. 1 in 2013.

In unveiling the annual crop report before the county Board of Supervisors, Pelican noted those four crops together accounted for nearly two-thirds of the county's total farm production value. And the top 10 most-valuable commodities accounted for more than 80 percent.

Still, San Joaquin County produces an astounding array of crops and significant amounts of products that don't make its top-10 list.

His agricultural inspectors issued nearly 11,300 export certificates in 2014, enabling 122 different commodities to be sold to 95 foreign countries.

Also, San Joaquin leads all other California counties in the production of pumpkins, about 80 percent of the state's crop; cherries, more than half; asparagus and watermelons, more than 40

percent; as well as apples, blueberries, grain corn and walnuts.

"It's been a great pleasure for me to get to know all the growers who produce that diversity here," Pelican told the board about his first year as county farm commissioner.

Supervisor Carlos Villapudua welcomed the report.

"It's just great news to see what this county offers ... not just to this county, but to the world," he said.

Historically, grapes and milk have been San Joaquin County's most valuable farm products.

Pelican noted that almonds and walnuts have overtaken and challenged those former leaders because of increasing plantings of the tree crops.

Andrew Watkins, San Joaquin Farm Bureau president and a Linden farmer, is among those who have expanded their walnut orchards.

"Economics dictate the crops that growers plant and the direction they head," he said.

And strong prices for tree nuts have underpinned those orchard expansions.

That could be changing this year, Watkins said. He noted walnuts have seen their market slacken in the face of predictions of a record crop and uncertainly over global demand.

Kevin Fondse, a Ripon almond grower, said it's a different story for almonds.

"There's a lot of interest from lots of different types of farmers in growing tree crops, because there is such a high value," he said.

"The drought really pushed the price up, because the crop is down significantly from two years ago."

When supervisors asked Pelican for his best guess about crop values for 2015, he said it's too soon to say. The year is not over, and it takes five to six months to gather the necessary data to begin to calculate crop values.

But at the board's request, the agricultural commissioner said he could provide quarterly reports

| on current issues in county agriculture, such as new state and federal regulations.

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