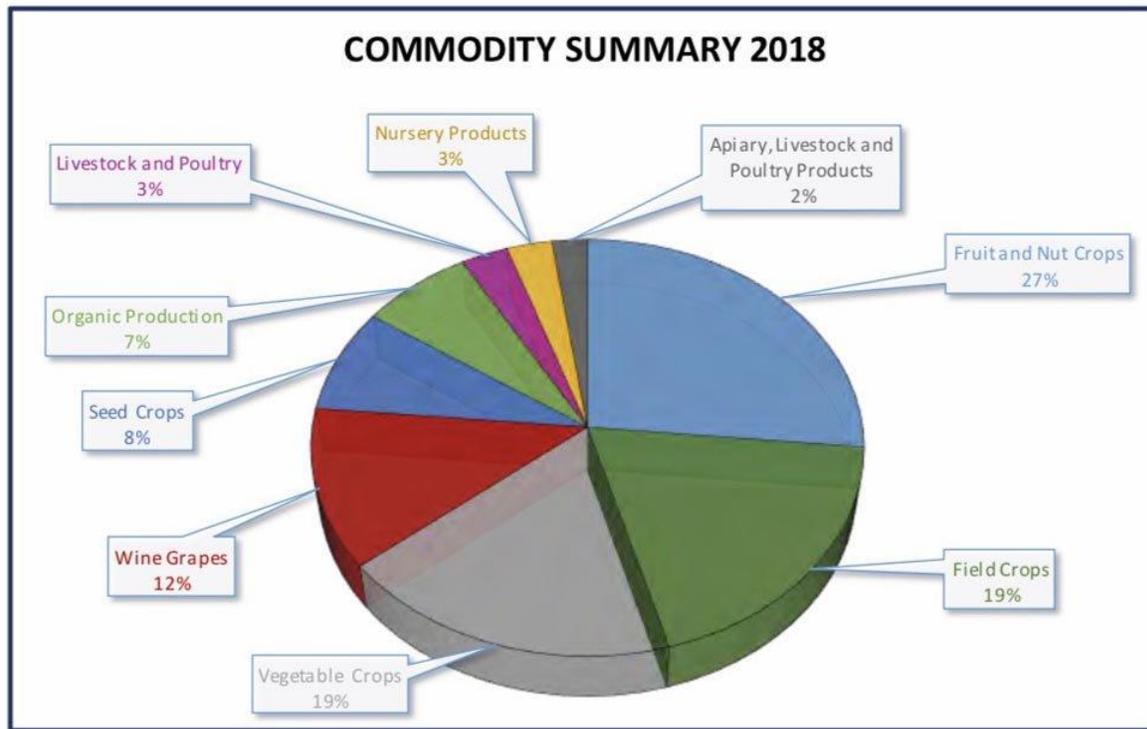


Almonds remain Yolo's top crop; water, tariffs worry local farmers



By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

One year after overtaking tomatoes as Yolo County's top crop, almonds held onto that position in 2018, with a gross value of nearly \$113 million, according to Agricultural Commissioner John Young.

And almonds are likely to hold that top spot "for the foreseeable future," Young told county supervisors this week as he presented the county's annual crop report.

Tomatoes had been the county's top crop for nearly 60 years — since 1960 — but for the last two years have ranked second. In 2018, processing tomatoes had a gross value of just under \$101 million.

Rounding out the top five this year: wine grapes, rice and organic production, followed by alfalfa hay, walnuts, sunflower seeds, nursery products and cattle.

All told, the value of the county’s agricultural production grew from \$636 million in 2017 to \$676 million in 2018, an increase of about 6.2 percent, Young said.

“So we had a good year in agriculture,” he added.

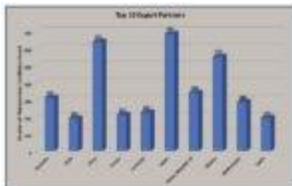
Protecting farmers

Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis credited county policy on protecting farming.

“The increase in value of our agricultural production tells me that our efforts to protect and promote agriculture have been successful,” he said.

However, Provenza added, “it has come at some cost.”

“In protecting ag land, we don’t put in the big box stores or other things that could be potentially lucrative in revenue to the county.”



Courtesy graphic

He and the other supervisors agreed with Young’s suggestion that the county focus on promoting processing next.

Young had noted that an economic opportunity exists for the county, particularly as crops like almonds and pistachios grow in acreage, “because all that crop needs to be processed.”

The county can choose to incentivize processing here, or allow crops to leave the county to be processed elsewhere “and the value added is somewhere else,” said Young.

“While all those acres are increasing... it’s an opportunity for economic development in that space.”

Provenza agreed, saying the supervisors could “take the next step and promote processing as an economic engine to the county.”

However, Supervisor Duane Chamberlain of the rural 5th District — a farmer himself — said there are challenges facing processors in Yolo County.

Almond processors recently told him that the local air quality control district won't allow them to burn waste products at their plants, he said.

"Colusa County will let them hull it up there and they can burn it up there, so they said, 'We're not going to build any more plants in Yolo County unless you guys work with us,'" Chamberlain said.

"So how do we make these things work? Because there's other counties that will welcome these processing plants."

More capacity

Chamberlain added that processors told him they need two more plants to handle the amount of almonds that are coming into production.

Young suggested streamlining permitting for processors would help.

As example, he noted the pistachio crop.

"It takes seven to 10 years for that crop to come into production," said Young.

"We currently have 4,611 (pistachio) acres that have been reported to us and more being planted all the time. Once it comes into production, (pistachios) will immediately jump into that top 10 category."

Having processing plants ready for these crops will be key.

"Timing is everything for processors," Young said. "What they want to do is get that plant up and operational in a quick amount of time. The most important thing we can do is make sure our permitting system is streamlined, so when somebody walks in the door, we've thought about it and we can fast-track them through the system. That's what is important. They don't want to have a crop sitting and not be able to process. They have a timeline they want to meet and it's important for us to help them with that timeline."

Exporting

Having infrastructure in place, meanwhile, has proven vital to one of Yolo County's other key crops: rice.

Young said the 1938 county crop report notes that Yolo County at the time had three of the state's seven rice mills.

"We're really strong in rice because we started with the infrastructure," Young said, "we've kept the infrastructure, so we (remain) strong in that field."

But rice is one of the local crops affected by trade policy.

Yolo County, Young said, “is an export county. Our main trading partners are Japan, China and Mexico.”

“That’s why tariffs hurt us. It hurts our farmers. It took us a long time to get rice into China. That was a long, arduous process to get that rice to start to flow and it now is starting to flow into China. They’re very good trading partners so we have to recognize what happens at the federal level impacts us here locally on the ground.”

Another looming challenge: dealing with water issues that will arise in the future, particularly as perennial crops continue to increase throughout the county.

Perennial crops in Yolo County have increased from 20,000 acres in 1938 to 129,000 acres in 2018, but the water system “is virtually unchanged, other than adding all the wells and drip lines,” Young said.

“There’s a change in the way we use water. I think we really need to start recognizing that. We’re not in a place where we have a problem today, but if the trend continues without us recognizing potential problems, I think we get in trouble.

Young said the county needs to study all the acreage in use, how it is irrigated, how much water is coming in and how much is going out “so we really have an idea of the sustainability.”

“It’s going to take creativity and its going to take us all working together to make sure we have the water supply for our future,” he added. “Water is number one. If we don’t have water, we don’t have people, we don’t have agriculture.”

“I agree a thousand percent,” said Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento, who urged Young to return with recommendations on what the county should be doing about water sustainability.

Said Provenza: “We know we’re going to need more in the future, so we need a plan ongoing to target what we need and figure out how to get it.”

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