

US (CA): Tomato growers say 2014 crop will reach estimate

An overall good growing season and warm, dry weather this fall have allowed California processing tomato growers to be right on target for a record crop this year.

The state's processors had contracted for a record 14 million tons of tomatoes, but early in the season, some growers and others in the business said they had doubts about whether all of the planted acreage would come to fruition, with reduced surface-water supplies, pressure on groundwater and concerns about early fall rains wreaking havoc on harvest.

But as of the end of last week, some 13.8 million tons had been harvested, with most of the state's harvest completed, said Mike Montna, president and CEO of the California Tomato Growers Association. He noted that growers also planted more acreage than originally thought—more than 290,000, up from the earlier estimate of 285,000 acres.

Montna said most processors "probably got somewhere close to what they hoped," and estimated the crop would be "within half a percent" of 14 million tons.

He said although growers in the southern San Joaquin Valley probably suffered more yield losses due to water availability issues, "it was still a good crop" for them and they were able to work through their problems, for the most part.

Northern California grower Jim Borchard, who farms in Yolo County, said those in the south state were not the only ones who had to work through water challenges. He noted he did not receive any surface water this year from the Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District and had to rely on groundwater for irrigation.

Delays in repairing one of his wells forced him not to plant about 50 acres of tomatoes. During the last third of the season, he encountered more problems with other wells, causing him to miss irrigations on some fields, which reduced his yields.

"I can't believe we're going to get close to 14 million tons," he said. "If you had asked me that a month ago, I would have said, 'No way.'"

But he said in fields where he had enough water, yields were "phenomenal" and that "it could've been a great year for me, but it ended up being just better than average."

With canneries paying a higher contract price this year—\$83 per ton, about \$10 per ton more than last year—Fresno County farmer Bob Wilson said that made tomatoes an attractive crop in a tight water year, because growers were able to stagger plantings and harvest at different times from July through September, allowing them to stretch out their irrigation schedule. Other row crops such as cotton must be irrigated all through the summer and then harvested at the same time in the fall, he noted.

"With tomatoes, you have a big window of being able to utilize your wells, because each time a field is harvested, that's one less field you have to irrigate," he said. "As the summer goes along, you have less and less demand on your wells."

Despite the higher contract price for tomatoes, Wilson said he was conservative with his acreage and opted to cut about 300 acres from what he would normally grow. Because tomato transplants had to be ordered in January before he knew he would not receive any surface water deliveries from the Westlands Water District, Wilson said he was committed to buying the transplants and used strictly groundwater to grow the crop.

To ensure he would have enough water for the 1,600 acres of processing tomatoes, he left 2,500 acres of his land fallow. He grew no cotton, whereas normally he would have planted 1,000 to 1,500 acres. He also didn't grow much wheat and disked up some alfalfa, choosing drought-tolerant crops such as garbanzo beans.

Wilson characterized his tomato crop as "pretty decent," especially early-season production. He experienced some yield reduction later in the summer, mostly due to hot weather, but he said that was normal. Beet curly top virus, which caused huge losses for San Joaquin Valley growers last year, was virtually nonexistent in his fields, he added.

While growers hope for a wet winter, it is the lack of rain and summer-like weather this fall that allowed farmers to harvest late-season tomatoes without running into the usual problems of mold and other quality issues that affect yield, said Aaron Barcellos, who farms in Merced and Fresno counties. This late crop, in turn, has allowed growers to deliver to processors the contracted tonnage they sought, he added.

Because Barcellos farms in five different water districts, he said he had a very difficult time working out his water budget early in the season, when it was still unclear how much water would be available. He said he and other growers were afraid to commit acres until they had a better grasp of how much water they had. He said he relies primarily on surface water for irrigation.

"The industry as a whole took a risk to be this late out," he said, "and it's kind of coming out well for all of us now because the weather is cooperating."

Though he decided to honor his commitments to processors and grew most of his usual tomato acreage, Barcellos said water shortages forced him to fallow about 30 percent of his overall crop acreage. For example, he didn't plant any melons and idled most of his cotton acreage this year.

Except for a stinkbug problem in a couple of his fields, he said tomato yields and quality have been good.

"It's great because the world needs processing tomatoes right now," he said. "What you always want is to be able to deliver to the market what the market needs."