

AGRICULTURE

CROP REPORT FOR 2014 SHOWS STEADY GROWTH



PHOTOS BY SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

The strawberry harvest is in full swing near Sunset State Beach west of Watsonville on Monday morning. Strawberries were once again the top crop in Santa Cruz County, according to the 2014 Crop Report.

Santa Cruz County harvested \$616M in crops

By **Samantha Clark**

sclark@santacruzsentinel.com
@samanthabclark on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Despite the unprecedented drought and the fragile state of local groundwater levels, Santa Cruz County crop values reached record levels, exceeding \$616 million in 2014.

The increase of \$17 million was a nearly 3 percent boost compared to 2013, according to the annual crop report released Monday. Total acreage decreased slightly, from 18,244 in 2013 and 18,019 in 2014.

“It shows stability in the agricultural industry,” Mary Lou Nicoletti, county agricultural commissioner, said of agriculture’s value. “It’s not a huge increase, but that’s not particularly surprising. Variable farmland is a finite resource.”

Although the nursery industry grew the most last year — up 10 percent to \$119.7 million — much of the modest growth comes from Pajaro Valley’s big

berry industry.

Strawberries, raspberries and blackberries brought in a total of \$396 million, which makes up 64 percent of the county’s agricultural gross value. Their value grew just more than 1 percent.

Although total acreage dipped slightly, strawberries fetched a higher price of \$2,280 per ton. They continue to reign as the county’s top commodity, which was valued at \$228 million. And in second place, raspberries reached \$131 million.

Meanwhile, apples, which didn’t see a cold enough winter, took a hit. Acreage fell 80 acres from 2013 along with their value, which dropped 8 percent to \$10.9 million.

The value of vegetable crops similarly declined about 3 percent to \$72 million. Leaf lettuce saw the highest growth with more acreage and better yields. While Brussels sprouts continue to enjoy their newfound popularity. Their value dropped 22 percent to gross \$11.3 million. Growers planted



Dust flies as a field worker discs a field along San Andreas Road on Monday.

13 more acres to meet consumer demand.

“There was just an unbelievable explosion in demand for Brussels sprouts in 2013,” said grower Steve Bontadelli. “We didn’t get the same spike in 2014, but it’s still high.”

Also noteworthy is continued growth in the local organic industry. More than 100 growers farm 4,000 acres of organic crops. The sector has ballooned

during the past decade.

In 2004, organic production was valued at \$18 million. In 2014, its value was \$118.8 million, up 24 percent from 2013.

“The profit margins are better in organics, and more people want organic,” said Dick Peixoto, owner of Lakeside Organic Gardens. “The driving force in this area is the high demand for organic strawberries.”

CROPS » PAGE 5