

California Prune Farmers Take Action to Enhance Quality & California's Competitive Advantage

YUBA CITY, CA, May 23, 2006 – After two short crops in a row, California prune farmers are optimistic that despite rain and cold weather during the bloom period this spring, Mother Nature may be smiling on them once again. While it is too early to predict the crop outcome and some industry watchers worry that the effect of adverse weather during bloom may result in heavy fruit drop through the growing season, initial fruit set appears to be favorable in most orchards and some farmers are preparing to reduce fruit sets by mechanically thinning orchards to achieve optimum crop loads.

The farmers are concerned that two short crops in a row have given their competition a foot in the door in markets that once exclusively bought their prunes from California. South American producers in Chile and Argentina have produced an unusually heavy crop of small prunes this year. Small prunes are less desirable because the ratio of skin and pit to flesh is much higher and small prunes lack the natural sugar that is characteristic of high quality dried fruit. Fruit size varies inversely with crop load. “California farmers are concerned that consumers might not get what they are expecting if they unwittingly buy prunes that are not from California,” said Greg Thompson, General Manager for Prune Bargaining Association.

The production of high quality fruit requires considerable effort to ensure that maximum sunlight reaches the fruit bearing branches and that the crop load is not excessive. “Hand pruning and mechanical thinning are used to renew fruit wood and manage the crop load,” explained Thompson. “In California, growers have direct access to the most advanced and most sought after horticultural resources in the world. These resources and years of practical experience translate to the production of the best quality prunes in the world. You can taste the difference.”

California farmers spend considerable resources to maintain their competitive edge in the market place. In addition to paying for cultural research out of crop proceeds to improve efficiency and quality, California prune farmers have learned to reduce crop loads in the spring by literally shaking the prunes off the trees. “This is not an easy thing to do, especially after a short crop, but it is one thing that separates the men from the boys when it comes to producing quality fruit,” says Thompson. “This is an advantage we have in California. We are years ahead of South America in learning this lesson, and it will take years for the South American growers to have the sophistication to

adopt this type of crop load management. We are encouraging our members to use this knowledge to gain back markets that we have lost because of weather related crop disasters. California growers have a real opportunity to demonstrate why we are the best in the world.”

Fruit size is very small in both Chile and Argentina according to reports from various sources. The average size is expected to be smaller than 85 prunes per pound. “Most consumers today enjoy pitted prunes,” says Thompson. “Prunes that small (85 per pound) are nearly impossible to pit. The best quality prunes are generally larger than 66 prunes per pound and the best size for making pitted prunes is 46 to 62 per pound. No one wants a sour, tough prune nowadays.”

While Chile and Argentina may produce many tons this year, the supply of good quality fruit suitable for pitting will be limited. Total production in the two countries is estimated by the International Prune Association to reach 95,000 tons. “But less than 30% of that production will be larger than 66 count per pound,” explains Thompson. “South American packers may be forced to try to process inferior sizes for consumer packages. This could do real damage to the market, if consumers buy prunes that are tough or sour. But the silver lining for California farmers is that commercial buyers may realize why California prunes are still the best buy.”

The Prune Bargaining Association was formed in 1968 as a grower-owned cooperative to improve the economy of the California prune industry, encourage the production of a quality product and provide a forum for growers to exchange ideas regarding the industry. The PBA establishes the industry’s raw product price for prunes.