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Central California onion production now under way, will continue throughout summer

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Fresh-market bulb onions are produced throughout California, with the main production areas being the low desert, the San Joaquin Valley and the southern and central coast. Planting takes place from September through May, and harvesting “begins in April or May and is usually completed in September,” according to “Fresh-Market Bulb Onion Production in California,” a publication on the subject published by the University of California Research & Information Center



A bag of yellow onions at a wholesale house in Los Angeles. Fresh or fresh-cut (“lightly processed”) onions account for approximately 45 percent of bulb onion acreage in California, “which ranks among the top fresh-bulb-producing states in the United States,” according to the publication.

Acreage of fresh-market bulb onions in California in 2009, the most recent date listed in the undated publication, was 22,766 acres.

For 2013, total bulb onion production in California was about 50,000 acres, a figure that normally doesn't fluctuate much from year to year, according to according to Robert C. (Bob) Ehn, chief executive officer and technical manager of the California Garlic & Onion Research Advisory Board, which represents processed onion producers in the state.

He did not have specific acreage or production data for fresh onions "because we don't deal with that, we just deal with processed." But there have been "no changes" in the processed market this year, which typically represents about half of the total, running at close to 25,000 acres "year-in and year-out."

Ehn said that although he cannot verify it, he thinks the fresh acreage may be down some this year because the market price last fall "wasn't really great." In particular, "the white and the yellow onions, I think, are down" in terms of planted acreage, although "I don't know how much. I wouldn't want to guess." But "we never see huge changes."

The harvest in the Central Valley was already under way when *The Produce News* talked to Mike Smythe, a salesman at Telesis Onion Co. Inc. in Five Points, CA. The company, which grows reds, whites and yellows on the west side of the valley, is down about 5 percent in acreage overall but is up in acreage in red onions, Smythe said. Whether that is typical of the industry, "I really can't say. I really don't know what other people are doing."

Yields are normal, and "size is mostly jumbo and larger, from what we've seen before," which is a fairly normal size curve, he said.

Acreage is up in Central California for Saven Corp., which grows exclusively flat yellow Vidalia-type lab-verified sweet onions marketed as "Oso Sweet." Mark Breimeister, a shareholder in the company and national sales director said June 7 that the company was currently harvesting in Brawley in the southern desert and expected to begin in the Bakersfield area in the Central Valley mid-June.

The season so far "has been fantastic," Breimeister said. "We are getting very good yields on the product. It tastes great, and the lab says it is sweet. We see the same thing happening in Bakersfield."

There are "a lot of onions," he said, but he expected prices to "remain somewhat steady in the mid-teens" for flat sweet onions. "The guys with the round sweet onions are offering their product out a couple of dollars cheaper than we can" because yields per acre are not as high on the flat onions.

Good news for onion producers has come this year in the form of a new tool for fighting onion thrips, a serious onion pest. The industry has been granted a Section 18 approval from the Environmental Protection Agency for a product called Movento, which is "just excellent," according to Ehn.

A Section 18 allows an unregistered use of a pesticide for a limited time if EPA determines that an emergency condition exists and no suitable alternative is available. The material is available for use on fresh as well as processed onions.

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