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The 411 on California citrus

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The state of California produces approximately 80 percent of all the fresh citrus marketed in the United States, accounting for a \$3.3 billion industry. California Citrus Mutual, headquartered in Exeter, CA, reported that in 2018, there were more than 3,000 growers farming about 320,000 acres of citrus in the state.

“We theoretically begin a new season every Oct. 1, and we’re shifting our production areas into Imperial County for lemons and we move up the San Joaquin Valley for mandarins and navels, and everybody is talking about the size of fruit,” said Joel Nelsen, president of the CCM. “We had 34 straight days of hot temperatures well above 100 degrees and the trees kind of shut down. That



probably will affect the overall fruit size.”

Still, Nelsen said the quality of the citrus is expected to be excellent and has so far looked strong.

“We’re going to try and figure out how to best market a lot of fruit, but there will be a lot of small fruit within that category,” he said. “What we will probably end up doing is emphasizing that we can sell these fruits in bags.”

That means fewer cartons, which is a lot less expensive. The 88s, 76s and 52s will be a premium because there will be fewer of them. And that means a completely different year from a marketing perspective.

“After last season, when we had almost a perfect season in terms of size and quality, getting the customer to shift to a smaller piece of fruit is always a difficult transition, no matter how good it tastes,” Nelsen said. “We’re going to make it as reasonable as possible for them to purchase the product in hopefully 3-, 4-, 6-pound bags. It’s easier for retailers, since they can handle that easier than they do loose fruit.”

The citrus farmers just started harvesting in mid-October and the flavor standard is going well.

“We’re not having any problems with finding mature fruit, so that’s always a good sign,” Nelsen said. “The heat does engineer a better tasting piece of fruit historically unless it gets really hot. So, from a flavor standpoint, we have that going for us.”

That’s created a lot of optimism around the industry and Nelsen said by the time July 4 comes around, things will most likely be looked upon as a strong season.

“Now, we have some worries relative to the trade disputes. We don’t like having a 40 percent tariff applied to our fruit upon arrival to China and we’re not sure we can ever become competitive at that level, so we’re going to have to try and find new homes for those oranges and lemons,” Nelsen said. “We’re hoping that this USDA trade mitigation package can help in terms of a marketing program

and create more shelf space in other markets.”

Another challenge that the California citrus industry is facing is the ACP Huanglongbing issue, a disease that is currently in the Los Angeles Metro area, and the hope is the industry can corral it and keep it there.

“We’re trying to ensure our production areas in Ventura County and over in Riverside don’t get infested with the disease so that effort is a \$45 million program and it’s top-of-the-mind for every grower no matter what part of the state they are in,” Nelsen said.

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