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## **California cherry growers anticipate near-record crop**

April 29, 2021

Harvest of the year's first fresh cherries has begun in California's southern-most growing areas and will soon be moving its way up the state.

"We're looking forward to 2021 being an excellent year for California cherries in terms of both volume and quality," said Chris Zanobini, executive director of the California Cherry Board.

"Statewide estimates are predicting a crop of 9.47 million 18-pound boxes, which is near the record produced in 2017.

"We're also really pleased with an industry-wide effort to vaccinate the essential workers who got us through last year's harvest and packing season in the early days of the pandemic," said Zanobini.

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“These workers will be once again be vital to delivering this year’s crop of cherries to consumers around the world.”

Zanobini noted that in March of last year, California cherry packers immediately reached out to health officials and began a relationship targeted at protecting those who work in the fields and packing facilities of California’s cherry industry.

“We have a very strong relationship with the farm employers here in San Joaquin County,” said Joan Singson, of San Joaquin County Clinics, which is affiliated with San Joaquin General Hospital. Singson is overseeing a massive effort in San Joaquin County to ensure that farmworkers who want vaccines have easy access to them. “A major part of our county’s economy depends on agriculture. We need to keep farmworkers safe and the only way we’re going to do that is to work together.”

Although cherries in California are grown in several counties, San Joaquin County continues to be the largest producer representing 60 percent of the state's total volume. When cherry harvest begins here, growers and packers will employ thousands of workers during their very short harvest season.

Most of the harvest and packing of fresh cherries is done by hand. Last year, additional measures were quickly put into place to protect workers. Packers throughout the state placed barriers or expanded the distance between workers on packinglines, significantly enhanced cleaning and sanitization protocols and began offering COVID-19 tests to workers and their families.

Many of these safeguards remain in place this year. In addition, a coalition of cherry packers has been working cooperatively with the San Joaquin County Health Department to hold vaccination events at their facilities.

“Farmworkers are the backbone of our industry,” said Guy Cotton of OG Packing in Stockton. “They are the ones who make it all happen. So, we have to make sure those who want to be protected can receive the vaccine.”

Cotton explained that cherry packers have been instrumental in assisting the County Health Department to make sure the farmworker community has access to shots. Because many of these workers have been employed by area packinghouses or growers for years, these companies are able to contact their workers to schedule vaccine appointments even if the employees don’t have a computer or aren’t currently living in the area. By opening up packing facilities as vaccination clinics, workers are able to come to a place where they feel safe and comfortable so they can receive the vaccine.

Brenda Rodriquez, who’s in charge of Human Resources at OG Packing, estimates the company has already vaccinated over 1,000 workers.

“Everyone has been so appreciative,” said Rodriquez. “They are just so happy we’re offering this opportunity. With cherry harvest coming so soon, everyone is wanting to take advantage of this service. Labor contractors we work with are very pleased and want us to do more of these events.”

Cherry packers, working with the County Health Department and San Joaquin County Clinics, are committed to making sure this important farmworker community is safe and protected. Singson estimates the San Joaquin County Clinics’ program has already vaccinated more than 5,000 people who work in the agriculture industry.

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“We’re coming up on cherry season right now and all the other crops will come right behind it,” said Singson. “We want to make sure our agricultural community is ready to handle that. Anything we can do to make that happen; we will do.”

Cherry season is expected to begin in San Joaquin County around May 7. Harvest will continue through mid-June.

“Consumers can expect to see California cherries appearing in their local stores in the next few days,” said Zanobini. “As people are enjoying this wonderful fruit, we hope they will continue to think about and thank the workers who makes California cherries possible.”

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