



Delayed harvest leaves tomato yields uncertain

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By Christine Souza

Until the last tomato is picked, the size of the 2011 California processing tomato crop will remain uncertain, after intermittent rains slowed the final stages of an already-delayed harvest.

"With the remaining 10 percent of the crop out there, there's some uncertainty regarding what the final tonnage number will be," said Mike Montna, president and CEO of the California Tomato Growers Association. "What we don't know is how the tomatoes affected by mold are going to impact the final delivery. Will the fruit hold out long enough for processors to be able to process it?"

The forecast from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 12.2 million tons, would be down only 1 percent from the 2010 crop.

But farmers began encountering problems this spring, when tomato fields were hit by wet weather and cool temperatures that caused disease and slowed plant growth. As a result, harvest started two to three weeks behind schedule, in mid-July. Farmers were applying fungicides to minimize bacterial speck damage. By August, harvest was well under way.

Additional delays happened in recent weeks, with hit-and-miss showers, leaving California processing tomato growers happy to be in the home stretch of this season's harvest.

Farmer Aric Barcellos of Los Banos harvested his final field of tomatoes last Wednesday.

"The early-season weather delayed the red color to appear on the tomatoes and it set the whole industry back three weeks right off the bat," Barcellos said. "Then in the last few weeks, we experienced rain. Once we get the rain, everything changes and causes you to spray more to prevent mold, which adds to the cost of production."

While farmers in Fresno, Kings and Kern counties appear to have good yields so far, they continue to harvest what remains. Montna reported that precipitation that fell during the first week in October reduced deliveries to canneries by 30 percent for that week. Processing tomato growers in Northern California experienced additional rain early last week, which caused harvest delays because farmers had trouble moving equipment through the wet fields.

Following the rain, tomato processors were forced to run at lower levels and some shut down completely, Montna said.

Even though the rains brought mold problems and resulted in farmers leaving some tomatoes in the field, Barcellos said he was pleased to report an increase in yields.

"Our yields are 3 to 5 tons per acre better than last year. I attribute that to a better growing season, choice of tomato variety and efficiency with our drip systems," he added. "It was just another year under our belt of farming and we're doing it better."

For Barcellos and other processing tomato growers, "doing it better" has meant conversion to drip irrigation, finding the optimal tomato varieties and increasing the size of the beds in the field to offer plants more room.

"With all of this new drip and everybody going to bigger beds, the yields are due to come up. It is not a 40 ton per acre crop anymore; 60 tons are common now," Barcellos said. "We went from 60-inch to 80-inch beds and two plants in the bed across from each other. You are not losing so many tomatoes in the furrow and it is just more manageable."

The Merced County farmer said processing tomatoes will always be part of his crop rotation, but price will guide what is planted year to year.

"If the price for cotton is better, we'll plant more cotton. We go to what is going to make us money, but tomatoes will always be in our rotation," Barcellos said.

This year's price for tomato growers was negotiated at \$68 a ton, \$3 a ton higher than the price growers earned last year, Montna said.

He said the California Tomato Growers Association has noticed that consumer demand for tomato products has leveled off domestically, and that he foresees additional opportunities for exports.

"Through the Tomato Products Wellness Council, we are doing what we can to increase consumption for processing tomatoes. For us, being in what people call a saturated market where people already eat a lot of our products, we want to know: Is there a way to get some penetration and do more?" Montna said. "This year we are launching a marketing campaign and we have a pilot project in two U.S. cities to answer the question, can we move the needle?"

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