

The U.S. National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) has released a forecast of 81 million cartons of Navel oranges in California for 2014-15, but one industry group has highlighted the challenges that water shortages bring to accurate surveying. 

The NASS' Navel Orange Objective Measurement (O.M.) Survey estimated an above average fruit set of 333 per tree in the Central Valley, with the category including conventional, organic and specialty Navels such as Cara Caras and blood oranges.

In a statement, California Citrus Mutual (CCM) president Joel Nelsen said the estimate was a "necessary and mandated announcement" that historically had been accurate, but this year may be different due to drought issues.

"The number released is developed via a painstaking field assessment and formula that rely upon a bevy of statistics compiled over the years," Nelsen said.

"This year that data base is being disrupted because of the drought and therefore the accuracy of the total number is suspect, in our view."

He said the statistical team relied upon specific acreage for fruit-set and limb count to establish an average number of fruit per tree.

"However, this year there is no way of knowing if that acreage has been affected by the drought, whether it has had a full complement of water, or if it has been removed. Additionally, the statisticians have no way of knowing how much of total acreage has been adversely affected.

"After canvassing a significant number of producers and shippers CCM believes the crop estimate is high. We know acreage has been removed from production but getting figures for a range has been difficult.

"We know the lack of water has affected fruit size during the growth stages but surveying 126,000 acres is almost impossible. We also agree there is more fruit on the tree as compared to last year, however fruit size is a concern."

CCM expected a 'normal' crop would materialize in the first four months of the season.

"The season will start early if we begin to have cooler nights and the fruit breaks into a bright orange color. It also appears that the hot temperatures during the summer has created a highly flavorful crop," Nelsen said.

"Size structure through February will be positive for the consumer. Exterior quality is also excellent.

"Water costs have been obscenely high which will be reflected in sales prices in order for growers to offset the increased expense. The industry is mindful, however, of its obligation to move a quality product to the market at a reasonable price."

The group also forecast Mandarin variety sizes would be larger than in past seasons due to the large amount of trees now in production, however prices would again reflect higher water costs.

In terms of Navels, CCM forecasts volume will be equal to or slightly less than last year's forecast due to the drought."All of the above is predicated, of course, on a moderate winter without freeze related losses," Nelsen said.

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