

The California citrus industry expects to produce a larger crop of mandarins and similar volumes of Navel oranges compared to last season amid continued high consumer demand.

California Citrus Mutual President & CEO Casey Creamer told FreshFruitPortal.com that growers are excited to kick off the 2020-21 season, whose start this year had not been as heavily impacted by Southern Hemisphere imports as in previous years.

Creamer said the quality of the crop is excellent, but he noted that the start of the season has been a little slower than normal due to some coloring delays.

"That's sort of holding us back a little bit on the start of the season. Some places might be able to go about now, it's not going to delay us too long. But it's great-tasting fruit and that we have early on in the season, and from all the reports that I've received people are just excited to get going again," he said.

He explained that in the year and a half prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, conditions had been really tough in the citrus industry regarding movement and prices that growers received.

"Our growers were suffering from that. And then we had the tariffs get reduced a little bit into China, which opened up the market a bit, and then we had the pandemic, which early on was a little bit sporadic, but as time moved along we got into a consistent rhythm and there was a very good movement of citrus in the latter part of the year," he said.

"Valencias have performed well in the market over the summer, and now we're looking forward to moving into the peak of our season. Everything's sort of out there and ready from a domestic standpoint, and we feel like there's going to still be good movement," he said. "People are still wanting to have vitamin C as part of their daily intake, and we're excited to be able to provide that for them."

He said that by all accounts, demand is still strong for citrus with market conditions looking good.

"There's been a little bit of a void - domestic citrus is in limited supply with most people being out of it. There have been some imports from the Southern Hemisphere but we don't see too much hanging over, and so we're really optimistic about getting this season going and fulfilling that demand," he said.

While the situation generally was more positive in terms of imports this year, Creamer did note that there was a surge in lemon imports from Argentina after the South American country [suspended exports to the EU](#) following numerous detections of citrus black spot.

This was especially problematic given the almost entire closure of foodservice sales channels.

Citrus production outlook for 2020-21

In terms of production forecasts, Creamer said that for mandarins the industry is expecting a "little bit heavier crop".

"The expectation is that we're going to have better supply this year than we had last season. We've also got some additional acreage just coming on board. So we'll have more supply, which should be well received from the supermarkets and retail side because the demand is definitely there," he said.

The Navel orange forecast for the Central Valley is 81m cartons. But Creamer noted that the final figure was likely to be different, highlighting that the region's estimate last year was 73m cartons, but utilization on the market side ended up around 85m cartons.

"From talking to our growers, they really see a similar crop to what they had last year, or slightly below in some instances. So we're expecting a manageable and very good tasting crop with good sizing. From a crop perspective it's looking like a really good year for a lot of the growers," he said.

He added that the CCM had received no reports of the wildfires in California in the late summer directly affecting citrus production, with the only impacts bring smoke overhang in the air which slightly delayed coloring.