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Hot weather slows CA grape season

As the 2017 California table grape season kicks into gear, export markets continue to be critical to the health of the industry as it grapples with prevailing hot weather



July is typically the month for North American table grape production to make the transition north from the desert to California's San Joaquin Valley.

However, the first two weeks of July found San Joaquin shippers struggling to get out of the gate with any kind of substantial volume, due to hot weather that prevailed throughout the valley since mid-June.

The fact that the San Joaquin deal was delayed somewhat in starting this year probably was fortuitous, as the North American supply channels were well filled with record shipments from Mexico.

"It's just been too hot for the fruit to get sufficient sugar levels for picking," John Harley of Anthony Vineyards told Fruitnet on 12 July. "We're just scratching the surface so far as an industry. But when you get daytime temperatures around 110°F (43°C) for several days running, the vines basically shut down."

Except for the first day of the month, temperatures in the Bakersfield area exceeded 38°C (100°F) every day through 17 July. Forecasts were for little let-up to the heat for most of the rest of the month.

Mexico and the Coachella Valley experienced even hotter weather during the same period, which had a significant impact on fruit quality in the latter stage of the desert deals. Consequently, domestic and export markets were eager for the San Joaquin to begin shipping fresh stocks of early-season varieties such as Flame Seedless and Sugraone. Limited supplies managed to keep FOB prices above the US\$20-per-carton level through mid-June.

"That will change once production picks up," predicted Harley. "By the third week in July, volume should be approaching normal."

Coming into the 2017 season, the combined production between the

Coachella and San Joaquin Valleys was expected to be slightly over 113m cartons (8.6kg). But with Coachella managing to ship only 4.9m cartons this season – down 75 per cent from the 5.3m cartons shipped in 2016 – and expectations that a significant percentage of fruit from the Delano area northward may have been damaged by the recent heat, California may not exceed the 110.5m shipped cartons it's averaged over the last three seasons.

"Most of the damage was north of Bakersfield; the fruit up there had (relatively) less sugar for protection," said Todd Bassett, who operates a commercial table grape inspection service for both domestic and international clients. "It should cut back on the overall volume this season and may even eliminate some extra fruit in order to make this deal profitable."

Whatever the final tally for shipments turns out to be in 2017, production for the California industry has been

relatively flat the last three seasons, averaging 110.5m cartons.

Export markets continue to be critical to the health of the industry, as demand from Asia, Latin America and Canada syphons off extra tonnage, which in turn props up fob prices and grower returns.

According to data provided by the California Table Grape Commission (CTGC), exports totalled 39.96m

cartons during the 2016 season, accounting for 36 per cent of all shipments.

Canada continues to be the largest international market for California, importing 11.3m cartons last year, followed by Mexico at 5.8m.

The next nine largest markets all reside in the Asia-Pacific region, led by China-Hong Kong with imports of 3.9m

cartons. The Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and Australia also saw imports of California table grapes exceed the one-million-carton level last year.

A full report on the 2017 California table grape season features in the July/August edition of Asiafruit. [Pre-order your copy here.](#)