

Imperial Valley olive market grows; rest of state is the pits

By ANTOINE ABOU-DIWAN Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, August 21, 2014 12:30 am

Unusual weather is taking a toll on olive harvests abroad and in California.

Spain, the world's No. 1 producer of olive oil, is in a drought. This year's harvest is expected to be 40 percent lower than last year's, according to the Wall Street Journal.

And California's olive harvest is expected to weigh in at 50,000 tons this year, a 45 percent reduction from last year's 91,000-ton harvest, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. Tulare County alone produces nearly 60 percent of California's olives.

The effect on market prices should benefit some growers, as the weather in Northern California is making the Imperial Valley a more desirable place to grow olives.

"Market prices have gone up about 10 percent," said Rick Benson, owner of Desert Olive Farms.

"More importantly, a lot of institutional players will look at the Imperial Valley. They're looking for local managers to farm their land," he added.

Olives are an ancient crop, but its advocates say it is perfectly suited for the Imperial Valley's hot and steady summer temperatures. Olives are pest- and disease-resistant, and use half as much water as other desert crops. And, unlike growers farther north, Imperial Valley's growers have access to their full allocations of water.

Thom Curry, general manager of Temecula Olive, a bottler and marketer of California olive oil, hopes to increase production two-fold next year. His company will be harvesting about 50 acres of olives in Imperial County this year, and another 200 acres outside the Valley.

Curry has been in the olive oil business for more than 10 years, and business is going well, he noted.



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Laboratory assistant Samuel Zamora talks about drip irrigation in an olive test plot Wednesday at Desert Research and Extension Center, University of California, in Holtville. JOSELITO VILLERO PHOTO Wednesday, August 20, 2014

"We're almost doubling our production every year," he said.

Curry attributes the demand for olive oil for the rediscovery of the benefits of the Mediterranean diet, which emphasizes seafood, legumes, vegetables and olive oil over the consumption of meat.

He serves on the taste panel of the California Olive Oil Council, which provides oil-grade certification for olive oil produced in California.

"When we started we could certify all the oil in a few sessions. Now it takes much longer," he said.

While olive trees are already salt- and drought-tolerant, researchers at the University of California Cooperative Extension-Imperial County are exploring ways to make them even more efficient.

Earlier this year, Khaled Bali, irrigation/water management adviser, announced that he is exploring the effects of agricultural drain water on the crop.

Staff Writer Antoine Abou-Diwan can be reached at 760-337-3454 or aabou-diwan@ivpressonline.com