

California's Fruit Industry

state's fruit acreage accounts for one fifth of total crop acreage and for one third of farm income from all crops

S. W. Shear

California produces about 43% of the total national fruit crop; 80% to 100% of the national crop of almonds, olives, figs, dates, grapes, and walnuts; nearly one third of the nation's deciduous orchard fruits and nearly as large a part of the citrus. About 40% of the nation's fresh citrus shipments and 20% of the processed tonnage originate in California.

The state produces very few limes and only 5% of the country's grapefruit. However, it accounts for nearly one third of the oranges and all of the lemons except the few grown in Arizona. In addition, since the war, California has grown over one half of the total national crop of deciduous orchard fruits—other than apples—and has packed almost two thirds of the canned tonnage of these fruits and over 95% of the total dried. It cans all of the fruit cocktail and fruits for salad in the United States; nearly all of the clingstone peaches and apricots and fruit nectar; and a substantial majority of the canned pears and baby foods made from fruit.

The fruit crops of California and the rest of the United States as a whole have grown with equal rapidity during the past 25 years. The 25% increase in the state's fruit crop since 1934-1938 has resulted entirely from an increase of over 40% in yields per bearing acre. Citrus is the only group of fruits that has increased more in other states than in California.

In the past 25 years, United States consumption of fruit and fruit products rose about 35%, from about 185 pounds to nearly 220 pounds per person in terms of equivalent fresh farm weight.

Since the war, over-all yields of fruit per bearing acre have averaged 65% greater in California than in the rest of the United States, being larger for every fruit except grapefruit, oranges, limes, and avocados. During 1949-1953, the state yield of noncitrus fruits averaged nearly six tons per bearing acre of about three times that of states west of the Rocky Mountains whose orchards and vineyards are not irrigated.

Irrigation has proven so essential to high yields and to profitable expansion of fruit and nut growing in most of California that about 80% of the acreage of these crops is now irrigated.

California—a highly specialized commercial fruit-producing state—processes a larger proportion of her fruit than do states much nearer the chief eastern fruit-consuming centers of the United States. During 1949-1953, California processed about one half of the total national tonnage of fruits processed—nearly 65% of the state's total fruit crop. Washington, Oregon, Florida, and Texas processed considerably more than one half of their fruit crops; and other states, about one fourth of theirs. The proportion of California citrus processed—mostly as juice—rose from 11% in 1934-1938 to 30% in 1949-1953. In Florida and Texas, the proportion processed rose from 16% to a little over 50% of the crop.

Processing of deciduous fruits and grapes also increased faster than production during the last 20 years. However, the tonnage canned and frozen by the comparatively young citrus-processing industry had risen almost sixfold by 1949-1953 as compared with a 25% increase in the longer established deciduous fruit processing industries, which had attained high levels of output even before the war.

While the proportion of noncitrus fruit processed in other states rose from 17% in 1934-1938 to 25% in 1949-1953, it only increased from 77% to 79% in California because drying declined almost as much as canning of orchard fruits and crushing of wine grapes increased. Even so, during 1949-1953, the state processed a total of 3,800,000 tons of noncitrus fruits a year, or about 25% more than the prewar average. Of this total, 2,200,000 tons—nearly double the prewar average—were not dried.

California's 1949-1953 output of dried fruit averaged 17% below the prewar level. Decreases were due mostly to a shift in domestic demand from dried to canned fruits and juices, coupled with drastic curtailment of commercial exports of nearly all kinds of dried fruits to the European countries that were our chief markets before the war. Even so, the state still produces about one third of the world's commercial output of dried fruit and over 95% of the United States total, keeping its position as the world's largest producer of every dried fruit except currants, dates, figs, and apples.

A great reduction in European commercial demand for our fruits has created a serious problem for the several fruits that have continued to produce substantial exportable surpluses since the war. Postwar European demand for nearly all of our chief fresh, dried, and canned fruits has been very small chiefly because those countries have not purchased the large quantities bought before the war. Even with large government export subsidies on several fruits, the quantity of United States fruit exported has totaled about 15% below prewar years.

The only substantial increases in postwar over prewar fruit exports have been in raisins and citrus juices. However, about 80% of the postwar exports of California raisins have been subsidized. Both the pack and exports of citrus juice were of minor importance before the war, but by 1949-1953, canned and frozen juice utilized almost 45% of the national citrus crop and about 6% of the pack was exported.

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A detailed table by individual fruits for California fruit production, bearing acreage and yields compared with other states, and California grower returns, per ton and per acre averages 1949-1953 was published in Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics Paper No. 147.

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