

California Olive Oil Crop Falls Short of 2.5 Million Gallon Estimate

Earlier this year, the Olive Oil Commission of California approved a budget that was based on crop volume of 2.5 million gallons for the 2020/21 harvest season. It seems clear based on reports from throughout the state that the crop will fall below that number.

To get an accurate perspective on this year's California olive oil harvest, the Olive Oil Commission of California reached out to growers and millers throughout the state and asked them a series of questions. A summary of their responses appears below.

The 2020 harvest season has been full of challenges for both olive growers and millers. As expected, producers across the state experienced a short harvest season this year with harvesting crews able to get the crop picked in about four weeks compared to the typical six. The majority of producers started milling in mid October and most finished between mid November and early December.

Per Acre Yields Down Significantly for Most Producers

As anticipated, per acre fruit yields were significantly down across most parts of the state. On the central coast and in the Fresno area, fruit yields were about a third of what they were last year and in the Sacramento Valley from Modesto north to Woodland producers saw an average of 2-3 tons per acre.

“Extraction was good but the quantity of olives was markedly reduced,” says Mark Sievers of Il Fiorello Olive Oil Company in Fairfield. “All our growers had less than half of last year. Some growers decided not to harvest at all due to minimal crop.” Sievers reported that he had less than 1 ton per acre on his own ranches.

John Mesrobian of The Mill at Kings River, located near Fresno, also decided against harvesting some ranches due to low yields. “Primarily we saw low set with Arbequina. We didn’t even harvest some blocks,” he said.

Producers on the central coast, Stockton/Modesto and Fresno areas all saw a lower-than-expected volume from their growers.

Oil Yield Good

Although per acre fruit yields were down across the state this year, oil yields in terms of gallons per ton remained high. Most producers throughout the state saw an average of 40 gallons per ton. These high oil yields are most likely the result of a lighter crop, since fruit that is on the tree tends to be bigger than in a heavy crop year.

“This year we had our highest yields in the mill ever with some growers achieving well over 50 gallons per ton and most averaging around 45 gallons per ton,” said Ciriaco Chavez, General Manager of Agriculture and Industry Affairs at Boundary Bend Olives located in Woodland.

Chavez points to better farming practices focused on improved canopy and irrigation methods and an increase in mill efficiency as the cause of this.

“In recent years we have been working closely with our growers to achieve the highest possible gallons per ton through improved in-field management and increased extraction efficiency in the mill,” said Chavez.

California Millers Taking Steps to Ensure Quality

The high oil yields like those experienced by some producers this year can come at a cost to quality. Low crop years generally bring challenges such as higher levels of mummified fruit, olive knot, increase in material other than olives (MOO) due to more aggressive harvesting, and longer times between harvest and delivery to the mill, since it takes longer to fill trucks.

“Quality is always a concern when going into an off-year like the 2020 harvest was. But thankfully we were able to produce quality oils,” said Chavez

Producers in the Chico and Modesto areas described their oil as good for a down crop year like 2020. And for producers in Stockton and the Bay Area, low quality didn’t seem to be a problem either.

“2020 has been such an exceptionally hard year, except, thank goodness, for the olive harvest,” said Samantha Dorsey, President at McEvoy Ranch in Petaluma. “the weather has been great for picking, per acre fruit yields are about average, and the quantity of oil in the fruit is high. It has been a steady year for us and the oil is so delicious.”

Brady Whitlow of Corto Olive Oil in Stockton also reported excellent quality this year.

“This season was short but sweet. Low fruit yields but good oil quantity and excellent oil quality,” said Whitlow.

As far as flavor characteristics producers reported noticeably fruitier flavor notes this year along with some bitterness.

Effects of the Pandemic

Like all of California farming, the COVID-19 pandemic had quite an impact on olive growers and millers. Producers implemented more stringent workplace policies to ensure the safety of harvest crews and mill workers.

“We had a really strict social distancing policy,” said Michael Fox, CEO of California Olive Ranch. “We learned a bit from our grower partners on how to handle harvest since many of them grow other crops like almonds and cherries that had already been through harvest during COVID. We applied what they learned and were able to complete harvest 100 percent COVID free.”

The pandemic has also hurt in-person sales and increased shipping costs for small producers such as Mark Sievers of Il Fiorello Olive Oil Company, while others had problems with limited harvest and mill crews due to COVID.

“Often, temp agency workers simply did not show up for a shift and any sickness symptoms kept employees home,” said Jonathan Sciabica of Sciabica Family California Olive Oil in Modesto.

Weather Also Presented Challenges

Along with low crop yields, quality concerns and strict COVID protocols, the central coast, Chico and Fresno areas also got hit with frost during harvest.

“We were able to get the fruit into the mill quickly so we really didn’t see any problems from it,” said Fox. “Fortunately, most of the blocks hit hardest by frost were already harvested. The other blocks that showed signs of frost damage were either not harvested or managed accordingly.”

To top it all off, 2020 has been yet another dry year with almost non-existent rain in most areas of the state, taking its toll on even a drought resistant crop like olives. The lack of moisture has olive growers like Mark Sievers asking, “explain what rain is - not familiar with the term.”

When asked to summarize the 2020 harvest season the sentiment from producers was mostly the same – 2020 has been hard and they look forward to saying goodbye to it soon with hopes that 2021 will be at least a little easier.

“Thanks to the tremendous effort from our growers, harvesters, and milling team we were able to make the most of a very challenging COVID harvest and look forward to what has the potential to be a very good 2021 crop,” said Chavez.