

Rural Migration News

Blog 273

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California Agriculture: Ventura

California's farm sales are \$50 billion a year, almost twice the \$27 billion farm sales of number two Iowa. Half of the state's farm sales are from the eight-county San Joaquin Valley, where Fresno, Kern, and Tulare counties collectively account for 45 percent of the state's farm sales.

The coastal county of Monterey is fourth, with farm sales of \$4 billion, followed by Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, where farm sales are almost \$2 billion each. In the three coastal counties, the leading commodity by farm sales is strawberries.

The three major coastal farming counties have 600,000 acres of irrigated crop land, half in Monterey county, or eight percent of the state's irrigated crop land, but they produce \$8 billion worth of farm commodities a year, over 15 percent of the state's farm sales.

Ventura

There are 100,000 irrigated acres of farm land in Ventura county, most on the Oxnard plain and along highway 126, which runs east-west.

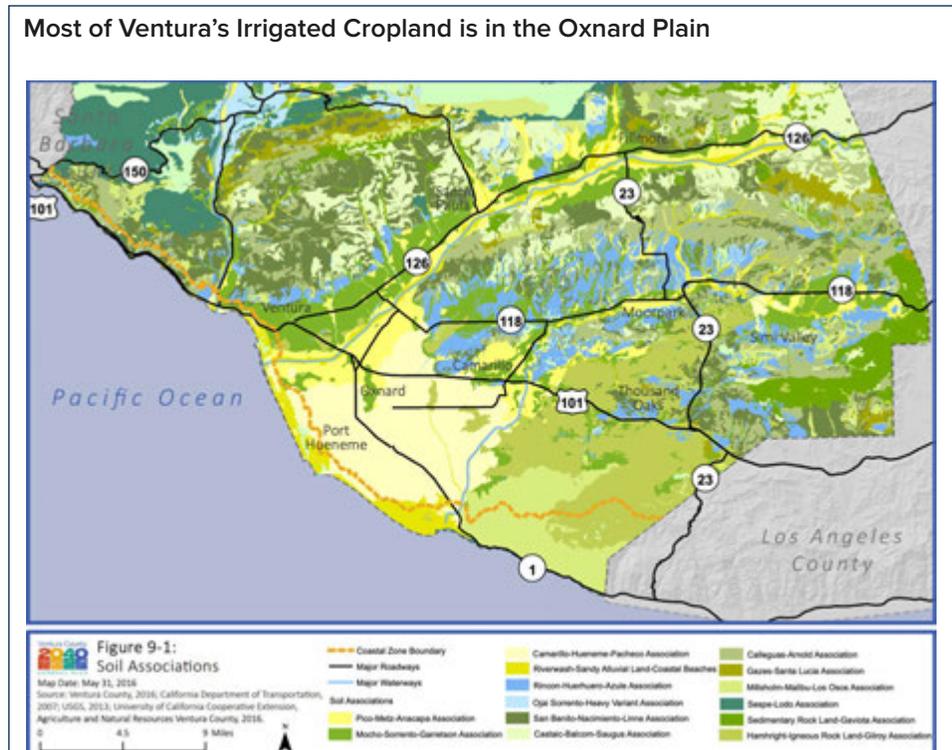
Ventura county farm sales were \$2 billion in 2020, led by \$574 million worth of strawberries, \$215 million worth of lemons, and almost \$200 million worth of nursery stock. There are 8,800 acres of strawberries in Ventura that produce an average 26 tons an acre; grower prices are about \$1 a pound.

Ventura's flat land encouraged the development and use of conveyor

belts that make strawberry harvesters more productive. A slow moving machine travels in front of pickers and accepts their full flats, enabling them to pick eight to 10 flats per hour; a flat or tray holds eight one-pound clamshells of strawberries.

Ventura county may pioneer the mechanization of strawberry harvesting. Several firms are developing machines that identify and pick ripe strawberries, but none are as fast as human pickers. Humans harvest at least 80 percent of the ripe strawberries on each pass through the field and pick a ripe strawberry every two or three seconds. The Harvest CROO machine can pick about half of the ripe strawberries on each pass through the field, and takes more time because the machine moves, stops, picks with 16 arms, and moves again to cover eight acres a day.

Strawberry mechanization may occur in stages. Under one scenario, strawberries would be picked into processing or juice trays rather than the clamshells in which strawberries are sold. The trays would



be taken to packinghouses, where electronic and human sorters would select those that can be packed into clamshells. Humans can pick much faster if they are putting berries into trays, and machines are likely to pick strawberries into trays rather than into clamshells.

The 17,000 acres of lemons in Ventura county yielded 340,000 tons worth \$635 a ton, while the 16,500 acres of avocados yielded 70,000 tons worth \$2,500 a ton.

The most valuable Ventura vegetable was celery; 14,000 acres yielded 35 tons an acre worth \$250 a ton.

Employment

Employment in Ventura county agriculture averaged 25,000 in 2020, suggesting that up to 50,000 individuals were employed for wages on county farms sometime during the year. Average direct-hire employment in crops (NAICS 111) rose to 18,000 by 2020, but average employment in crop support services (1151) fell almost 20 percent between 2000 and 2020 to 5,300. Three-fourths of average crop support employment is with FLCs; the 52 Ventura FLCs employed an average 4,700 workers at weekly wages of \$715 in 2020.

Ventura county is one of the few counties where direct-hire employment rose and crop support employment, including FLC employment, fell by 20 percent between 2000 and 2020. A major reason for more direct-hire employment is increased strawberry and raspberry production and declining production of lemons and avocados. Berry growers tend to hire workers directly, while most lemons and avocados are picked by FLCs who also provide harvesting equipment and haul harvested fruit to packing houses.

Average weekly wages in Ventura

Strawberries were 1/4 of the \$2 Billion Ventura Crop Sales in 2020

RANK	CROP	VALUE
1st	Strawberries	\$575,373,000
2nd	Lemons	\$216,190,000
3rd	Nursery Stock	\$193,135,000
4th	Avocados	\$179,727,000
5th	Raspberries	\$141,547,000
6th	Celery	\$126,870,000
7th	Tomatoes	\$54,387,000
8th	Peppers	\$41,165,000
9th	Blueberries	\$38,781,000
10th	Cabbage	\$37,135,000

Conveyor Belts that Travel in Front of Strawberry Pickers Enable Them to Pick Faster



Strawberry Picking Machines are Currently Slower than Human Pickers



crop support were 10 percent lower than direct hire wages until 2012, after which they began to exceed direct-hire wages and were 20 percent higher in 2020 at \$875 a week for crop support and \$675 a week for direct hires.

Many Ventura berries are grown under temporary protected structures, typically plastic-covered PVC pipe structures, that protect the growing plants from birds and wind. The structures can be moved and other crops planted to avoid the accumulation of pests and disease in the soil.

European Strawberries are Often Picked into Totes or Bins and Packed in Sheds



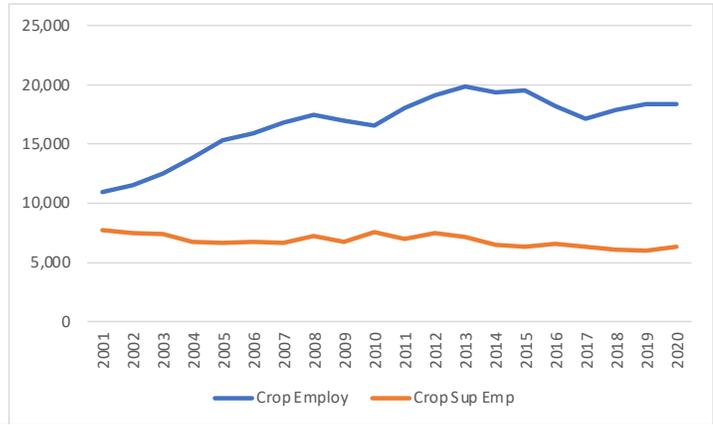
Celery is Cut and Packed in the Field



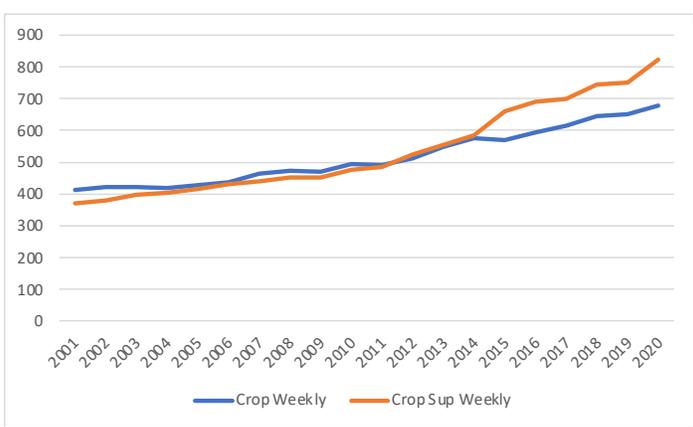
Lemons and Avocados are Picked into Over-the-Shoulder Bags and Dumped into Bins



Ventura Direct-Hire Employment (Blue) Rose and FLC Employment Fell Since 2020



Average Crop Support Weekly Wages (Orange) have Exceeded Direct-Hire Wages Since 2012



Many Ventura Crops are Grown Under Tunnels



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