

Rural Migration News

Blog 274

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California Agriculture: Santa Barbara

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.

Santa Barbara

Most of Santa Barbara county’s land is not farmed. Crop farming is concentrated in the north around Santa Maria, Lompoc, and Solvang, with smaller areas farmed in the south-

ern coastal areas. Santa Barbara county has 120,000 irrigated acres of farm land, most in the Santa Maria valley in the north of the county.

SB county had farm sales of \$1.8 billion in 2020 (excluding cannabis), led by strawberries worth \$725 million, cauliflower worth \$110 million, and broccoli worth \$105 million. The value of SB fruits were \$903 million,

and the value of SB vegetables was \$650 million; wine grapes were worth an additional \$95 million.

Santa Maria has emerged as the California region with the most acres of strawberries due to relatively low-cost land and a long growing season. The combination of a long season and low cost housing means that most strawberry pickers are local residents, although the employment of H-2A workers is increasing.

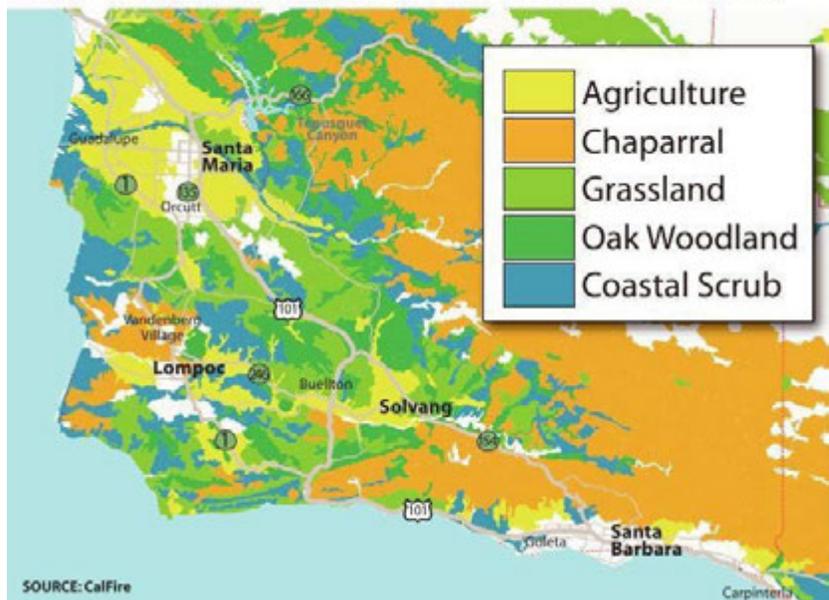
Housing H-2A workers in Santa Maria and nearby cities is controversial. Santa Maria enacted an ordinance that prohibited housing H-2A workers in single family homes, prompting a federal threat to sue the city for discrimination; the city council repealed the ordinance. In nearby Nipomo, a house under construction for H-2A workers was burned.

Employment

Employment in Santa Barbara county agriculture averaged 25,000 in 2020, suggesting that

Most of SB’s Irrigated Farm Land is in the Northwest around Santa Maria

Major vegetation types in Santa Barbara County



up to 50,000 individuals were employed for wages on county farms sometime during the year. Average direct-hire employment in crops (111) was almost 13,500 in 2020, but average employment in crop support services (1151) almost tripled from 2000 to 11,300 in 2020. Three-fourths of average crop support employment is with FLCs, and the 63 SB FLCs employed an average 8,400 workers at weekly wages of \$670 in 2020.

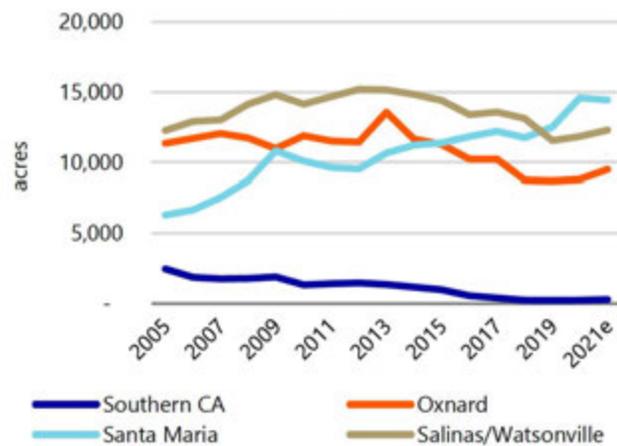
Average weekly wages in crop support rose in lockstep with direct-hire wages, were 10 percent lower in 2016-17, and then rose faster so that (1) workers brought to farms by FLCs and (2) those hired directly earned the same average \$750 a week in 2020. Employees of FLCs earned 10 percent less than all crop support workers, an average \$670 in 2020.

SB Farm Receipts are Rising with Expanded Strawberry Production



Santa Maria has Almost 15,000 Acres of Strawberries

Figure 3: Total planted area in California, 2005-2021e



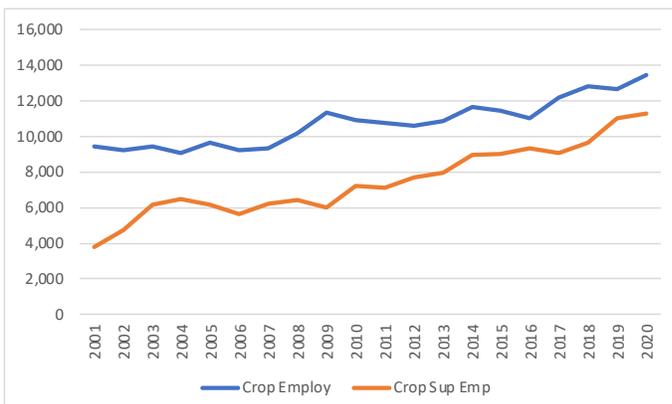
Housing Meant for H-2A Workers was Burned in Nipomo in April 2016



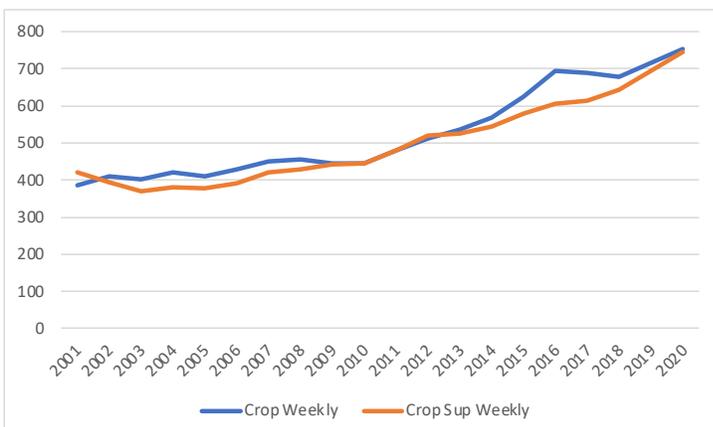
The Value of SB Cannabis was Almost \$200 Million in 2020

Cannabis Overall Production Value		
Product	Production	Value
Flower (Various)	2,106,397 lbs.	\$178,074,000
Trim	178,692 lbs.	\$15,000,000
Nursery Products	1,053,005 plants	\$1,512,000
Total Value		\$194,586,000

SB Average Crop Support Employment (Orange) Rose Faster than Direct-Hire Employment



Average Weekly Wages were \$750 for Direct Hire and Crop Support Workers in 2020



References

County Ag Commissioner Reports

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<https://www.countyofsb.org/uploadedFiles/agcomm/Content/Other/crops/2020.pdf>

<https://cdn.ventura.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Agriculture-Commissioner-2020-Crop-Report.pdf>

Martin, Philip and Zach Rutledge. 2021. Proposed changes to the H-2A program would affect labor costs in the United States and California. California Agriculture. <https://calag.ucanr.edu/archive/?article=ca.2021a0020>

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