

Frequently Asked Questions About Ventura County Agriculture

Q. What's the county's most valuable crop?

A. Strawberries. They brought growers \$542 million in gross revenues in 2010.

Q. What are the other top crops?

A: In terms of gross revenues, the other top 10 crops are:

- Celery: \$182 million
- Nursery stock: \$180 million
- Lemons: \$175 million
- Raspberries: \$167 million
- Avocados: \$148 million
- Tomatoes: \$120 million
- Cut flowers: \$47 million
- Peppers: \$45 million
- Valencia oranges: \$28 million

Q. What's the total value of crops grown in Ventura County?

A. For 2010, the estimated gross value was \$1.9 billion.

Q. How does that compare to other counties?

A. Ventura County ranked No. 8 among California counties in total crop value in 2009, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture. The most recent national data put Ventura County at No. 10 among all counties in the United States.

Q. Which crop covers the most land?

A. Avocados, which are grown on 18,916 acres. Lemons are next, at 16,856 acres, followed by celery, 11,949 acres, and strawberries, 11,875 acres. Together, those four crops account for more than half the total harvested acreage in the county.

Q. How many farms are there in Ventura County?

A. According to the most recent Census of Agriculture, conducted every five years by the National Agricultural Statistics Service, Ventura County had 2,437 farms in 2007. The agency defines a farm as an operation that produces at least \$1,000 worth of products in a year.

Q. Is that more or fewer than in the past?

A. Overall, fewer. There were 2,760 farms in the county in 1998. The number did increase between 2002 and 2007, however. In 2002, the county had 2,318 farms.

Q. Are Ventura County farms bigger or smaller than those elsewhere?

A. Smaller, and they're shrinking. The average farm size in Ventura County is 106 acres, down from 143 acres in 2002. The statewide average is 313 acres, and the nationwide average is 418 acres. In Ventura County, the median farm size — meaning half of all farms are bigger, and half are smaller — is 14 acres.

Q: How much farmland is there in Ventura County?

A: There are various ways of calculating that. According to the California Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping Program, Ventura County in 2006 contained 124,959 acres of "important farmland" and 199,004 acres of grazing land, for a total of 323,963 acres of agricultural land. According to the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, 96,316 acres of crops were harvested in the county in 2009.

Q: How does the area in agriculture compare to the county's total land area?

A: The county's total land area is 1.2 million acres. Using the Department of Conservation data, 28.1 percent of the county is agricultural land. (About half the county's land area consists of Los Padres National Forest, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and other protected public lands.)

Q. How does the area in farms compare to the area in cities?

A. According to the state, Ventura County has 102,873 acres of urban and built-up land. So, for every acre of shopping mall, city street and housing tract, there's approximately an acre of celery, strawberries, lemons, peppers, flowers and other crops.

Q. Is farmland being lost to development?

A. Yes. Even though voters have approved laws intended to protect farmland and open space from development, the county continues to lose about 600 acres of farmland to development each year.

Q. How important is agriculture to the Ventura County economy?

A. In addition to generating direct on-farm employment and revenue, agricultural production supports a wide range of other businesses, including packinghouses, equipment dealers, chemical applicators, pest-control firms, labor contractors, fertilizer and other supply dealers, trucking firms, fuel distributors, and repair and manufacturing facilities. Altogether, farming and farm-dependent businesses provide an estimated 31,000 jobs in Ventura County, more than any other sector of the economy except services. Agriculture and agriculture-related businesses account for about 4.4 percent of overall economic activity in Ventura County, generating \$2.1 billion in revenue and \$76 million in indirect business taxes annually. One in 10 county residents relies to some degree on income derived from farming.

Q. How many field workers are employed on Ventura County farms?

A. It's difficult to get a reliable count, but there are believed to be about 20,000 Ventura County farm workers. The number ranges seasonally from a low of 15,000 to a high of 25,000 during the peak spring and summer harvest of strawberries, lemons and avocados.

Q. Where are they from?

A. If they are like the rest of California's farm worker population, an estimated 95 percent were born outside the United States, and 91 percent were born in Mexico.

Q. What percentage are undocumented immigrants?

A. Precise local figures are not available, but statewide surveys suggest at least 57 percent of California's field workers are in the country illegally.

Q. Where do local growers get their water?

A. It depends on where they are. Most growers in the county rely on groundwater, particularly on the Oxnard Plain. Others purchase it from agencies that deliver water imported from Northern California by the State Water Project, or from agencies that collect surface water in local reservoirs. Local groundwater and surface water are by far the most important sources for local farmers.

Q. Are Ventura County growers switching to organic production?

A. Not very quickly. There are 79 registered organic growers in the county, and they account for only 5,186 acres — about 5 percent of the farmland in cultivation.

Q. Do growers use a lot of pesticides?

A. It depends on how you define it. According to figures compiled by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation, 5.8 million pounds of insecticides, herbicides and fungicides were applied in Ventura County in 2009, the most recent year for which data are available.

Q. What's the most commonly used pesticide?

A. The most abundantly applied pesticide by weight in 2009 was mineral and petroleum oil, 1.5 million pounds. Oil is mainly used in orchards to control scale, aphids and mites, and it is considered benign as pesticides go, a mildly toxic substance approved in certain formulations for use on organic crops. It works by coating and suffocating pests rather than by poisoning them. Second was chloropicrin, 1.4 million pounds. It's a soil fumigant used to prepare fields for planting strawberries, tomatoes, raspberries, peppers and other crops.

Q. Why do growers use fumigants?

A. The chemicals are injected into the soil before planting to kill weeds, insects, nematodes and other pests. Research and practical experience have demonstrated dramatically reduced crop yields when fumigants are not used. Because farmland costs so much to buy, rent or lease in Ventura County, growers must maximize production and revenues in order to stay in business.

Q. How does farm pesticide use compare to household use?

A. Farmers are not alone in using chemicals to kill unwanted organisms. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that home and garden use accounts for about 20 percent of American pesticide consumption. If that average holds in Ventura County, then local residents use nearly 2 million pounds of toxic chemicals in their homes and yards every year.

Q. How many people do Ventura County growers feed?

A. Although local farms and ranches produce more than 100 types of fruit, nut, vegetable and grain crops, the county's climate makes it particularly suited to such specialty crops as citrus, berries and fresh vegetables. Some of these are produced in astonishing abundance. Ventura County produces enough strawberries each year, for example, to satisfy the annual consumption of 85 million Americans. In an average year, it would take 77 million Americans to consume the county's lemon crop, 135 million to consume its celery production, and 45 million to eat all its avocados.

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