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Did you Know?

California's farmers increased the value of their production by 24 percent from 1992 to 1997, while farm production expenses rose just 5 percent in the same period.

In 1992 farmers spent \$13.8 billion to produce \$17.1 billion worth of agricultural commodities.

In 1997 farmers spent \$14.5 billion to produce \$21.1 billion worth of agricultural commodities (1997 figures in 1992 dollars).

Source: *1997 Census of Agriculture*

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Trends in California Farmland Use

California agriculture is growing, despite urbanization

by Don Villarejo & Shaw Perrin

Many Californians are convinced that agriculture in the Golden State is in decline and that urbanization will someday doom the state's remaining farms. Efforts to preserve existing farmland have gained national attention and are now of concern even among urban and suburban residents. The nonprofit American Farmland Trust has ranked Central Valley farmland "the most endangered" by urbanization in the U.S. (*Farming on the Edge*, 1997). Indeed, the fast growing urban areas of the Central Valley are visibly displacing farmland in the periphery of cities such as Fresno, Modesto, Sacramento and Bakersfield. Demographers suggest another 4 million residents will be added to the Central Valley by 2025, threatening much of the best remaining cropland.

The 1997 Census of Agriculture shows that California agriculture continues to experience remarkable growth, despite urbanization. The Census data, based on surveys submitted by the state's farms, reports a major increase (10%) in the state's harvested cropland, by more than 780,000 acres since 1992 (see table below). California farmers are now harvesting more cropland than ever before in the history of the state's agriculture, according to the Census.

As acres devoted to crops is increasing, pastureland is decreasing. Some of this pastureland is being urbanized, but much of it is being converted to intensive crop production, explaining why more pastureland is being lost than total farmland. For example, thousands of acres of newly planted vines and trees now stretch toward the horizon on both sides of Highway 5 in the region north of Lodi. Much of this land was formerly used as pasture. Statewide, farmland devoted to orchards increased 336,000 acres in just five years, reaching the highest total in California history. In 1997 vegetables were harvested on a record total of 1,209,259 acres, up 19% from the 1992 harvest.

Data collected by California County Agricultural Commissioners (CAC) support these findings from the Census. For example, while the Census records a 640,000 acre increase in Central Valley harvested cropland during 1992-97, CAC data report an increase of 550,000 acres in the same period (see graphs, page 5).

Farmland Use Patterns in California, Acres, Census of Agriculture

	1992	1997	Change
Total Land in Farms	28,978,997	27,698,779	-1,280,218
Pastureland	17,418,180	15,630,917	-1,787,263
Harvested Cropland	7,760,773	8,543,159	+782,386
Land in Orchards	2,245,781	2,582,084	+336,303
Vegetables Harvested	1,016,744	1,209,259	+192,515

see FARMLAND page 5

FARMLAND from page 1

The difference between the two data sets is accounted for by non-bearing trees and vines (included by the Census but not by the CAC), and by acres on multiple cropped land (included by the CAC but not by the Census).

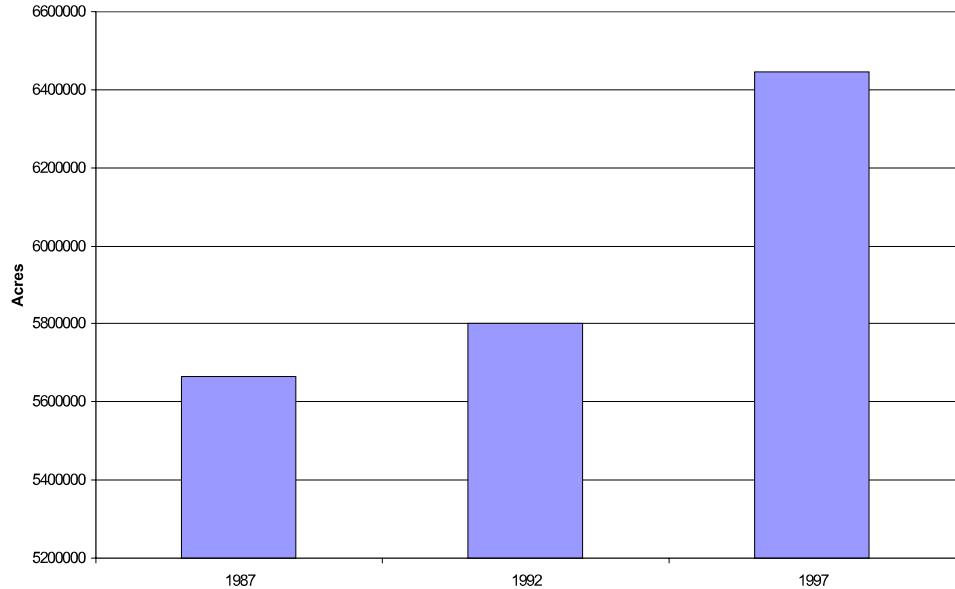
These findings from the Census and the CAC underscore the most important trend in the state's agriculture: the intensification of agricultural production. This trend is evident not only in the increasing acres devoted to higher-valued fruit, nut, vegetable and nursery crops, but also in the state's livestock industry. As acres devoted to pasture decreases, the state's dairy and beef industries continue the trend toward fewer operations with more animals. The average size dairy herd in California (602), for example, is ten times the national average and increased 50% from 1992 to 1997. California is now the nation's leading dairy state.

The reason for the intensification and continued growth of farm production in California, and for the unexpected increases of harvested cropland, is not hard to find. In 1997, farmers received more income from the sales of agricultural products than ever before, up by 24 percent in real terms over 1992 figures. The greatest increases in farm sales were reported for vegetable, fruit, nut and berry crops. And farmers reported record high prices and record high production in a number of important crops, most notably wine grapes.

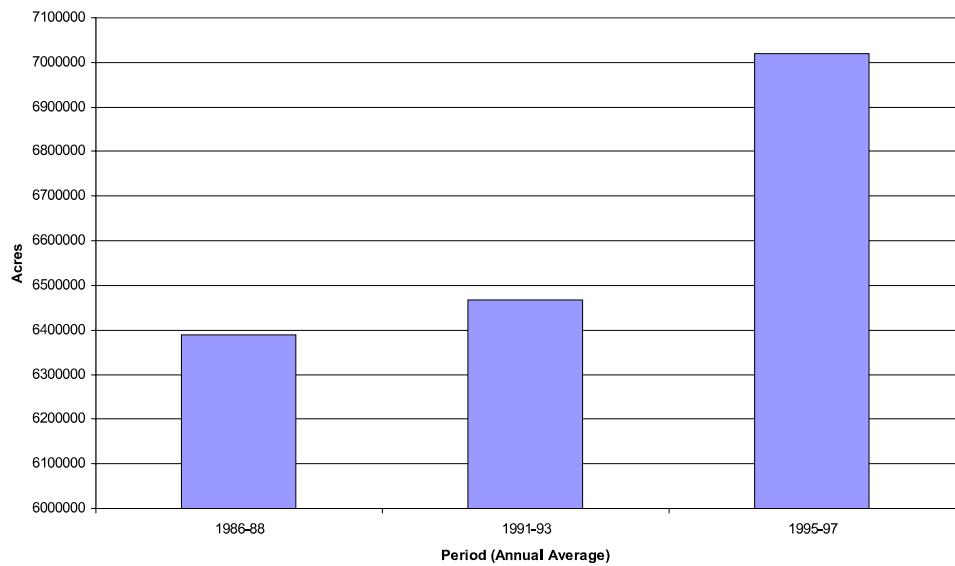
The sheer size of California's farm economy is difficult to grasp. The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) reports that in 1997 farm cash receipts totaled \$26.8 billion, three times bigger than the combined box office receipts of the entire U.S. motion picture industry.

As farmers in other parts of the U.S. complain about the lowest grain prices since the Great Depression, and hog farmers bitterly protest prices that have fallen by a factor of three in the last year alone, California farmers have quietly

Harvested Cropland, 19 Central Valley Counties Census of Agriculture



Harvested Crop Acres, 19 Central Valley Counties Agricultural Commissioner Reports



planted more vegetables, trees and vines than ever before. Expanded consumer demand for fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as increased access to foreign markets, present an exciting opportunity for farmers able to pursue these markets. Urbanization and population growth in fact help farmers by expanding markets.

The key to the success of California agriculture has been its ability to muster the resources needed to take

advantage of the mild climate, excellent soils and key location to access Pacific Rim markets. The most important of these resources are reliable water supplies, labor and an infrastructure that can assure prompt marketing of highly perishable commodities.

The protection of these resources to insure a healthy California farm economy is far more pressing than the threat of urbanization. ♦