

California farmers a bright spot in state's economy

By Diana Marcum, Los Angeles Times

FRESNO — As Californians savor their Thanksgiving feasts, the state's farmers are especially thankful. California's agriculture sector is on track for a record year, a rare bright spot in the state's economy.

Prices for cotton, grapes and other crops are near all-time highs. Foreign buyers are gobbling California almonds, grapes, citrus and dairy products. Agricultural exports through September are up 16% over the same period last year. Net farm income is projected to post strong gains in 2011 after nearly doubling over the previous decade.

At a time when other Golden State industries are struggling, times are good down on the farm. Just ask Steve Moore.

The Fresno County pistachio farmer recently completed the harvest on his 480-acre spread near Huron, part of what's estimated to be California's second-largest pistachio crop ever. Prices are strong, at around \$2.10 a pound, driven by growing demand in places including China and Israel.

Moore started with 160 acres in 1982, planting trees that take seven years to produce. "Looking at those bare sticks in the ground, I thought I must be nuts," he said. But the crop is so lucrative he's looking to expand again.

Indeed, prices for all manner of farm products are so high that Vernon Crowder, an agricultural economist with Rabobank, a major agricultural lender, has been seeing some unfamiliar faces at industry events.

"When you go to ag conferences you now have venture

capitalists hanging around,” he said. “But they find it very difficult to beat out another farmer for land, and that shows you how strong the market is. There’s been a fundamental shift as the global market demands more food and more expensive food.”

That’s good news for California, the nation’s leading agricultural state and the fifth-largest producer worldwide. In contrast with the grain-and-livestock focused Midwest, California farmers cultivate more than 400 commodities, including more than half of the nation’s fruits and vegetables.

Looking for artichokes? Dates? Kiwi? Pomegranates? California accounts for more than 99 percent of the U.S. production of each of those crops, according to the California Food and Agriculture Department.

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