

Madera Co. crop value grows to record \$1.3 billion

County is No. 1 grower of figs in the nation.

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By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

A growing demand for pistachios, figs and grapes helped push Madera County's total crop value to a record \$1.3 billion last year.

A switch to higher-value crops is helping to drive up Madera County's production values, agriculture industry leaders say. Crops values rose 7.5% over the previous year, according to the county's 2008 crop report.

Cha Vang, senior agriculture and standards inspector in Madera County, said farmers have been pulling out crops with lower financial returns -- peaches, plums and nectarines -- and planting more pistachios, almonds and pomegranates.

Among the biggest increases in value and acreage was the pistachio crop, which jumped to \$178.9 million in 2008 from \$84 million the previous year. In 2008, growers devoted 26,900 acres to pistachios -- 1,700 more than in 2007.

Fig growers have seen the value of their fruit rise to \$16 million last year from \$14.2 million in 2007. Madera County is the No. 1 grower of figs in the nation.

Fig grower Kevin Herman said much of the expansion in the fig industry is driven by demand for fresh figs. These days, the industry supplies figs nearly 10 months out of the year.

"You are now seeing figs on the Food Network and people are wanting to experiment with figs," Herman said.

Pomegranate crops also are increasing. Vang said that about 5,300 acres of pomegranates have been planted in Madera County over the past several years.

The almond crop has been growing, despite the weak economy and a large supply that dropped the crop's value. Countywide, the almond-crop value which includes nuts and hulls, dipped to \$212.2 million from \$233 million. But more acres are being devoted to it. In 2008, growers devoted 66,800 acres in the county to almonds, up by 2,300 in 2007.

Madera's wine-grape production had a robust year, with red varieties of grapes increasing in value to \$64 million last year from \$59 million in 2007. The value of white varieties rose to \$44 million from \$37 million.

Julia Berry, executive director of the Madera County Farm Bureau, said the county continues to increase its farm production because of the availability of land and the commitment to preserve the area's rural lifestyle.

"We have done a good job of maintaining an agrarian county, and the Board of Supervisors has done a good job of protecting it," Berry said.

Crops declining in acreage include cotton, which dropped from 10,200 two years ago to 2,500 today. The cotton crop's value has plummeted from \$4.3 million to \$2.1 million. The recession has contributed to a slight decline -- 2.7% -- in the total value of milk production, which was \$293.9 million last year. Although the value dropped, milk remains the county's leading commodity. The total value of processing tomatoes declined from \$14 million in 2007 to \$5.2 million last year.