

Farming's Future: More Production, Less Land

by Don Villarejo

California farms produced some \$24.5 billion in 1996, according to an August 1997 announcement of the Department of Food and Agriculture. Farm cash receipts from the sale of agricultural commodities jumped some 10% over the previous year's results, achieving another record high for the third year in a row. The rate of growth of the state's farm sector exceeds the rate of growth of both the state and national economies.

At the same time, farm land conversions to residential and commercial use continue at a record pace, leading some, such as the American Farmland Trust, to issue alarmist reports predicting the imminent demise of agriculture in California's Central Valley. Indeed, according to the *Census of Agriculture*, the amount of land devoted to crop production purposes (cropland) in the San Joaquin

Valley — the world's premier farming region — decreased by some 265,000 acres in the five-year period 1987-92, equivalent to a loss of 415 square miles. Much of this loss of cropland occurred in the urban periphery of the Valley's major cities.

Adding to the contradictions is the fact that commodity prices, averaged over all types of crops, have remained relatively stable throughout the past several years. Thus, the remarkable growth of farm cash receipts in this period can not be attributed to higher prices paid to farmers.

The single most important factor in the growth of California's farm economy over the past decade has been increased production of fruit, nuts, vegetables and ornamental horticultural crops. Gains in the amount of land used for growing these crops have more than offset overall declines in cropland. In fact, losses of cropland have been mainly of land

used for certain extensive crops (barley, oats, sugar beets) or of cropland used for pasture.

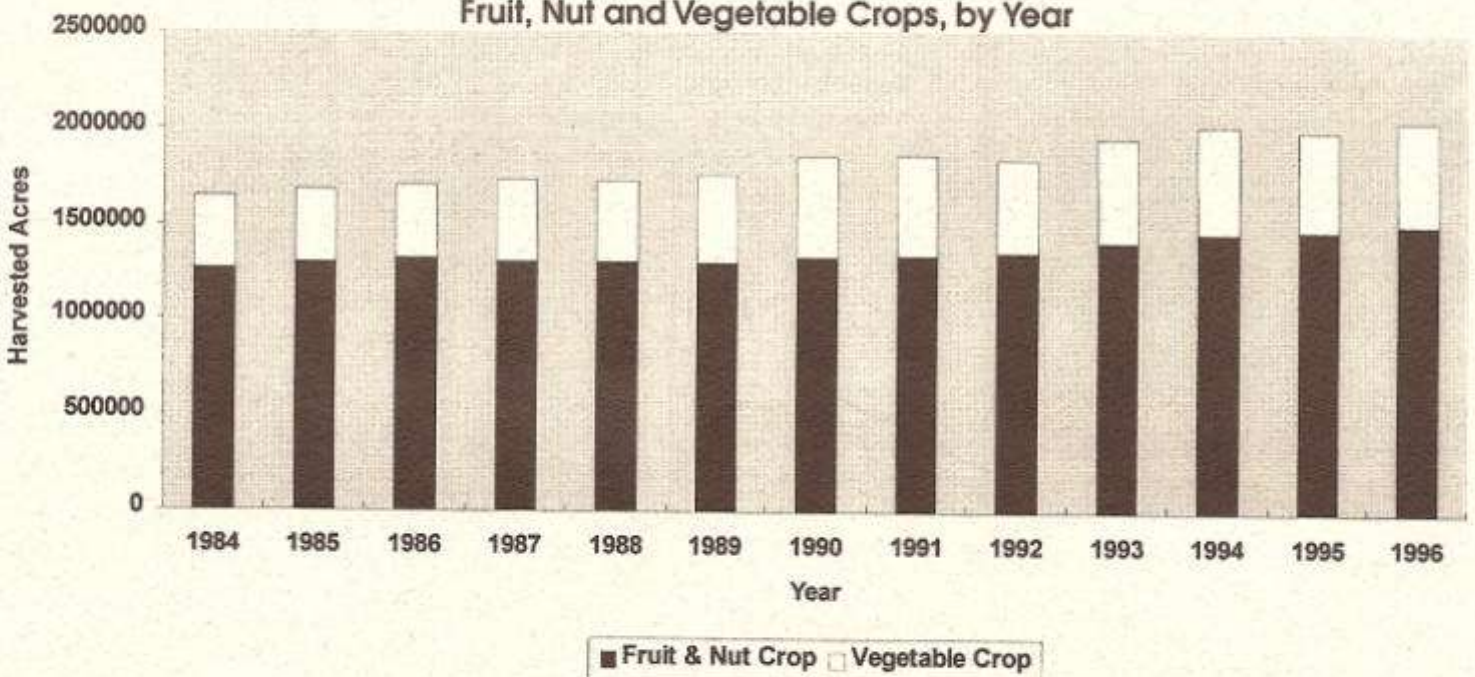
Within the San Joaquin Valley, as shown in Figure 1, increases in harvested acres of fruit and nut crops, and of vegetable crops have been remarkable. From 1984 through 1996, the total amount of harvested acres of these crops increased by 392,120 acres (+24%). The rate of growth was about twice as great for vegetable crops as compared with fruit and nut crops.

In the Sacramento Valley, the growth in harvested acres of these same crops was 121,173 acres (+34%) in this period. The rate of growth for vegetable crops was more than three times larger than for fruit and nut crops.

Clearly, Central Valley agriculture, taken as a whole, is performing quite well and is not an economic sector in serious danger. Instead, land once used for extensive crops or

(see FARMING on page 7)

Harvested Acres, San Joaquin Valley
Fruit, Nut and Vegetable Crops, by Year



(MILLAN from page 2)

Diego County community of Escondido. Dozens of indigenous Mexican migrants, mostly Mixtec and Zapotec, were found living in rat-infested shacks.

Millan has indicated that he would like to expand the TIPP program, possibly into another industry. He has also reportedly been somewhat critical of the U.S. Department of Labor's much-heralded program of "garment industry self-regulation," which former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich lauded as a model of how an industry can act to clean up its own problems with minimal government intervention. Recent raids in Los Angeles area garment shops revealed a plethora of labor and safety law violations by some of the leading companies participating in the self-regulation program.

When he resigned as Assistant State Labor Commissioner in August 1996, he was known to have been disappointed by being passed over for the position of labor commissioner in favor of Roberta Mendonca. But she failed to win state Senate confirmation earlier this year, largely because of opposition by labor and Democratic party leaders to her conservative views. Some saw the vote against her as retaliation against the Governor over the Industrial Welfare Commission's scrapping of mandatory overtime pay in California after eight hours of work.

Millan's experience and fluency in Spanish are a decided plus for the TIPP program. Both the agricultural and garment industry labor forces are composed nearly entirely of immigrants; many are Spanish-speaking.



(FARMING from page 3)

pasture is being converted to more intensive crops, yielding much higher crop values per acre. In fact, farm cash receipts per acre can be ten times larger when converted in this manner.

When orchards or vineyards near an urban center are paved over, some may conclude that this is an irreplaceable loss of these commodities. What has actually occurred is that other land, most often far from urban areas, is being converted from *extensive* to *intensive* crops. The total of these latter types of conversions has clearly greatly exceeded conversions of cropland to urban use. Thus, the net change of land use is both an overall decrease of cropland and an increase in land used for intensive crop purposes.

California today has more land planted to orchards (trees and vines) than ever in its entire history. In 1996, more than 25,000 acres of vines were planted, mostly of wine varieties. This growth is clearly a response to the current boom in wine production.

While the loss of agricultural land to development does represent an irreplaceable decrease in the amount of natural resources available for farming, the conversion of other land from extensive to intensive farming purposes is a response to growing markets for fruit, nuts and vegetables. One of the important consequences of these conversions is a significant increase in the demand for manual labor, ironically contributing to additional population growth in the region. This hand-in-hand increase of production value and of labor demand shows no sign of abating: as far into the future as anyone can see, both will continue to grow.



(IMMIGRANTS from page 4)

assimilation patterns among immigrants, and concludes that most immigrants assimilate within just a generation or two due to intermarriage and acculturation of native-born children. The report closes without making any policy recommendations and without presenting any final conclusions. These are not easy to draw from the extensive, and occasionally contradictory data and analysis presented throughout the report. The one clear message that comes through is that immigration is not as big of a problem as it is sometimes perceived to be. It is not occurring any more rapidly today than it was 50 years ago, nor is there any indication that the current wave of immigrants will have greater trouble assimilating with time into mainstream American society.



Please join us for dinner and dancing at the

CIRS 20th Anniversary Celebration

Saturday, November 22, 1997
6:30 to 10:00 p.m. in Davis

Ticket prices are \$15 individual, \$25 for two or \$100 for a table of eight. Music will be provided by the Dick Livingston Trio. For event and ticket information, call (916) 756-6555, ext. 12. We look forward to celebrating with you.