



## Imperial Valley onion farmers report improved crop

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By Kate Campbell



Imperial Valley workers gather field-cured onions before sending them to nearby packing and shipping facilities. Farmers say this year's crop offered good yields, with little pest or disease pressure. Valley growers, who normally produce about a quarter of the state's onion crop, say there has been an increase in contracted acres planted due to water shortages in other growing regions and adverse weather in other states.

Photo/Thomas Cox

With onion harvest in the Imperial Valley nearly complete, farmers say fresh-market onions are being shipped to customers across the U.S. and to export markets in Canada, Mexico and Japan. Processing onions used in food service are now being bagged and cured in the field.

Crop quality is as good or better than last year, farmers say, and market prices are also slightly improved compared to last year's already strong market.

Imperial County onion grower Larry Cox said his harvest is nearly wrapped up, with the last red onion loads now being shipped by truck to eastern destinations.

"We have contracts with food service companies all over the U.S., and generally the prices we're getting are better this year, both for the yellow and red varieties," said Cox, who is Imperial County Farm Bureau president.

He attributed the solid prices in part to weather problems in the Pacific Northwest and Texas. Unusually high temperatures affected the late-season storage crop and created quality issues. In addition, Texas growers experienced flooding that caused crop damage, further increasing demand for Imperial-grown onions.

Water shortages in the San Joaquin Valley also triggered a shift in contracted growing acres for onions to the Imperial Valley, which saw acreage for processing onions nearly double this year, Cox said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said California farmers produced more than 1.6 million tons of onions last year, a total nearly identical to the previous year's harvest. California leads the nation in onion production. California onions—fresh market and processing—had a farmgate value of more than \$227 million, USDA reported.

Perhaps one of the world's most ancient foods, onions today are grown by fewer than 1,000 U.S. farmers in 20 states, the National Onion Association said. Along with California, other top-producing states include Washington and Oregon.

Ralph Strahm, a longtime Imperial County onion grower and county Farm Bureau director, said he has been able to hire enough people to help harvest the labor-intensive onion crop.

"We're in the state's most southeast corner, right against the Mexican border," said Strahm, who grows Imperial Sweet onion varieties for the fresh market. "It's an advantage to be that close to the border, because it's easier for the workers to get to work from their homes in Mexicali."

He said onion harvest in the Imperial Valley begins at sunrise and includes cutting the plant's green tops and turning up the bulbs. The onions are field-cured in burlap bags to reduce moisture and sugars.

Fresh market onions are packed in the field and Strahm said, like other growers, he follows food safety procedures included in the state's Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement. Although onions aren't a leafy green, he also grows leafy crops and has adopted similar food safety practices across all crops.

"It just makes sense to have food safety procedures that are uniform across our farms," he said. "Food safety is very important to us and all the farmers in the valley and the state."

Imperial County pest control advisor Kenny Humes, who also has farmed onions, said advancements in onion cultivars have increased yields and reduced susceptibility to pathogens, which helps improve crop quality.

Because the Imperial Valley is much hotter and somewhat removed from the state's other growing regions, pest and disease pressures tend to be somewhat lighter, crop advisors say.

"This year, the pest pressures have been down drastically," Humes said. "We've used a lot less fungicide. Even though we thought El Niño would bring a lot of moisture, that didn't happen here and we didn't need to apply as much material as expected.

"Basically, it has been a pretty good growing year, based on field and crop conditions. Farmers harvested a beautiful onion crop," he said.

Strahm said one thing that might surprise people who aren't familiar with the onion harvest is all the logos on the burlap bags used in the field during harvest.

"Many of the bags are coffee sacks that have come into the U.S. with beans from places like Costa Rica and Nicaragua," he said. "We buy the used sacks by the barrel and reuse them."

He described using burlap as a cost-saving and environmentally friendly way to harvest the crop.

The National Onion Association says onions arrived on the Mayflower. According to diaries of colonists, bulb onions were planted as soon as the Pilgrims could clear the land in 1648.

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