

Packers to pay record price for Valley raisins

By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

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Fewer acres, higher demand and competition from the region's wineries pushed the raisin industry's packers to pay a record \$1,700 a ton for the 2011 crop.

The Fresno-based Raisin Bargaining Association - a group representing growers - reached an agreement with all of the industry's 13 packers recently.

Earlier this summer, at least two packers were paying \$1,700 a ton. Now, all of the packers are paying that price.

"The raisin packers had to step up and get more competitive to get growers to make raisins this year," said Glen Goto, president of the association.

One of the reasons for the competition came from the region's wineries. Growers always have the option of making raisins or selling their Thompson Seedless grapes to the wineries to be made into juice concentrate.

But this year, a shrinking supply of concentrate increased the demand -- and the price. The wineries offered a record \$265 a ton for grapes.

"They were really going after the white grape juice," Goto said.

Although growers are pleased with the higher price for raisins, Goto said it remains to be seen how many will benefit.

Growers experienced higher costs to produce this year's crop. A cool and wet spring increased mildew problems earlier in the season and at harvest time growers scrambled to find labor, often paying more for workers.

A rain storm last week also may cost growers money. Some growers may be forced to send their grapes to a dehydrator or to be reconditioned to remove any sand from their raisin grapes.

How much of the crop was lost remains to be seen.

"The crop may be smaller," Goto said. "We just don't know how much smaller."