

## Agriculture in Lake County

### Past

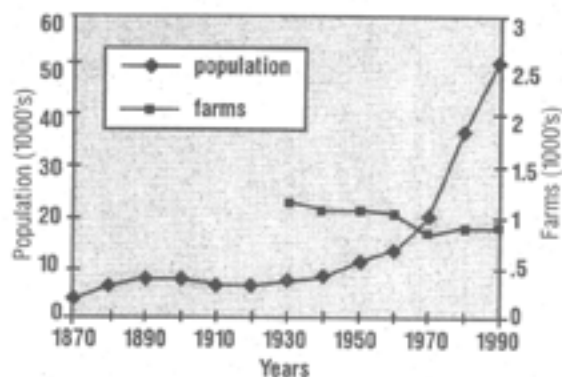
Native Americans thrived on nature's bounty of acorns, berries, roots, fish, and game. Cattle ranching began in 1839 with the first Mexican land grant in Lake County. European settlers who moved to Lake County after the California Gold Rush in 1849 practiced subsistence level agriculture based on dairy and livestock. They soon began to export wheat, followed in the 1870s to 1890s by wine grapes, pears, hops, walnuts, and "Blue Lake" green beans.



Changing markets, the national economy, and pest and disease outbreaks all helped shape Lake County's agricultural history. Once important commodities such as hops, "Blue Lake" green beans, prunes, and sheep are now greatly reduced or gone. Pear plantings boomed in Lake County in the early 1900s, then shrank by nearly 50 percent due to fire blight disease and the Depression. Today pears have recovered to be the leading agricultural commodity. The fledgling wine grape industry was nearly eliminated by Prohibition in the 1920s, and only in the 1960s did new vineyard plantings begin.

The human face of Lake County agriculture has also changed. Midwesterners fleeing the "Dustbowl" drought came as farm laborers in the late 1930s and were assimilated into the community. They joined local residents, including Native Americans and Filipino workers. In the 1940s Hispanic laborers came to replace workers recruited for the war effort, and today most agricultural operations depend on this increasingly stable work force.

### Lake County Population and Number of Farms



During the past several decades, the total Lake County population has grown significantly, while the number of farms and farmers has declined somewhat.

### Present

Farms and ranches are very important to Lake County's rural character and economy. Today the major commodities in order of value are:

(1) Lake County **pears** are famous for quality. Some pears are sold locally, but most are shipped for fresh market or canning around the nation and world. Producing orchards covered 5,200 acres in 1996 with a market value of \$31 million.

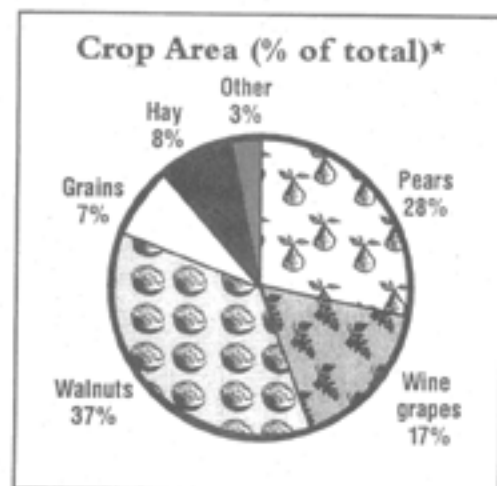
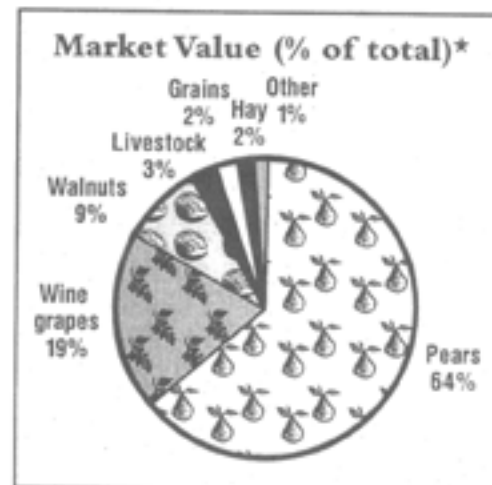
(2) Superior quality **wine grapes** are grown in Lake County thanks to warm days and cool nights that produce an ideal blend of sugar and acid. Wine is produced in the county, and grapes are also sent for processing in other areas of California. As of 1996, producing vineyard area was 3,200 acres with a market value of \$9 million.

(3) **Walnuts** occupy the largest area of Lake County permanent crop land, and most are grown without irrigation. In 1996 walnut orchards covered 6,900 acres, with a market value of \$4 million.

(4) **Livestock, grains, and hay** have a market value of about \$4 million annually. Beef cattle are the major livestock product. Other products include

sheep, specialty poultry, and goat milk and cheese.

Besides these major commodities Lake County has a diversity of crops including apples, kiwifruit, almonds, peaches, prunes, sweet corn, tomatoes, melons, strawberries, squash, Christmas trees, and nursery stock.



\*Source, 1996 Lake County Agricultural Crop Report. Livestock value does not include steers and heifers.



## Future Trends

Pear acreage, while decreasing somewhat as poor orchards are removed, will continue to be a major contributor to Lake County agriculture.

Wine grape acreage will likely double in the next five years due to the recent recognition of Lake County's potential for high quality wine grape production.

Some walnut acreage may continue to be replaced by wine grapes.

As population grows, direct marketing of specialty crops will increase to serve local residents.

At the same time, Lake County's population is expected to triple to about 150,000 by the year 2040, creating challenges for agriculture due to:

- loss of crop land which is often located on level ground, well suited for urban development.
- subdivision of crop land into small parcels for rural residential development.
- increased interface between agricultural and urban areas, increasing the possibility of conflicts between farmers and their urban neighbors.
- greater competition for scarce water resources between agricultural and non-agricultural users.

With citizen awareness and proper planning, a healthy agricultural industry can continue to be an important part of life in Lake County along with quality residential and commercial growth.

Some ways to ensure local agriculture's future include:

- continued strong support by county government for agricultural land preservation with diversion of development to land not suitable for intensive agriculture.
- better communication between farmers and neighbors to increase understanding and reduce conflicts.
- continued adoption by farmers of new environmentally sound techniques.
- water conservation, water purchases, and community involvement in water use planning.
- support of opportunities for profit and survival of local farms and ranches, for example, farmers' markets.
- encouraging youth to become involved with local agriculture.



To learn more refer to leaflets in this series on farmer and neighbor land use conflicts and solutions, land use issues, water use issues, vineyard and orchard operations, and livestock operations.

## Additional Resources Agencies and Organizations

Lake County Department  
of Agriculture  
883 Lakeport Blvd.  
Lakeport, CA 95453  
(707) 263-0217

University of California  
Cooperative Extension  
883 Lakeport Blvd.  
Lakeport, CA 95453  
(707) 263-6838

Lake County Farm Bureau  
65 Soda Bay Road  
Lakeport, CA 95453  
(707) 263-0911

Lake County Museum  
255 N. Main Street  
Lakeport, CA 95453  
(707) 263-4555

California Women for  
Agriculture  
P. O. Box 279  
Finley, CA 95435  
(707) 987-0603

Greater Lakeport  
Chamber of Commerce  
290 S. Main St.  
Lakeport, CA 95453  
(707) 263-5092

Clearlake Chamber of  
Commerce  
4700 Golf Ave.  
Clear Lake, CA 95422  
(707) 994-3600

Lake County Marketing  
Program & Visitors Center  
875 Lakeport Blvd.  
Lakeport, CA 95453  
(800) 525-3743  
[www.lakecounty.com](http://www.lakecounty.com)

## References

*Lake County Factbook*, U.C. Cooperative Extension  
*Histories of the Lake County Wine Grape Industry and  
Bartlett Pear Industry*, available at the Visitor  
Information Center, Lakeport  
*Mauldin's Lake County History*, available at the Lake  
County Museum, Lakeport  
*Lake County Agricultural Crop Reports* (various years),  
Lake County Department of Agriculture

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## Agriculture in Lake County, California

### Past, Present, & Future



Produced by the Lake County Farmers  
and Neighbors Planning Committee,  
dedicated to ensuring continuation of  
agriculture as part of Lake County's  
economic and cultural future.