

90 percent of all television series and other prime-time shows were being made in California. "Whether you want to be an actor, or a writer for films and television, or a producer—you still have to come to California," commented one award-winning Hollywood screenwriter.

Agriculture

Perhaps the most striking feature of California's contemporary economy was its diversity. Even as the state led the nation in such fields as high technology, tourism, and entertainment, it remained the leading agricultural state. With less than 3 percent of United States farmland within its borders, California produced more than 50 percent of the country's fruits and vegetables. California continued to lead the nation in the production of milk, butter, beef cattle, strawberries, tomatoes, turkeys, and more than 60 other farm commodities, producing all of the nation's commercially grown almonds, artichokes, figs, olives, pistachios, and raisins. California also gained the dubious distinction of being the country's leading producer of marijuana, reckoned by some to be the state's largest cash crop. By 2004 California's agricultural cornucopia was pouring more than \$27 billion into the state's economy, providing jobs for 400,000 workers.

Modern California agriculture was still shaped by earlier trends, but it also faced some new and difficult challenges. Consolidation continued to reduce the number of farming units and to increase their average size. Thousands of commercial family farms remained in operation in California, but in the general trend toward consolidation many small farmers were squeezed out. Hard hit by soaring fuel prices, increased foreign competition, and rising costs of production, San Joaquin Valley farmers in 2000 formed the Coalition to Save the Family Farm. "The small farmer problem is really scary, a sad situation," said Gloria Palacios, a former operator of a small farm near Fresno.

Meanwhile, California's supply of prime agricultural land was threatened by urban development. By the 1990s, such land was being lost to housing developments, shopping centers, and freeways at the rate of more than 50,000 acres per year. The problem was especially evident in the Central Valley, ranked by the American Farmland Trust in 2000 as "the single most threatened agricultural region in the United States." Most of the urban growth was caused by refugees from the coastal metropolitan areas who were attracted to the Central Valley by its relatively inexpensive housing and lower cost of living. The conversion of so much valuable farmland into tracts of suburban housing, in the words of a former Sierra Club president and Kern County resident, was "a crime and a tragedy."

Another unresolved problem in California agriculture was the status of the state's farm workers. The creation of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) in 1975 raised hopes that the status of California's agricultural workers would be permanently improved. Farm workers did make major gains during the late 1970s when Democratic governor Jerry Brown appointed a prolabor majority to the ALRB. Many of these gains were reversed as Brown's Republican successors staffed the board

with representatives of the growers and reduced its funding. The influence of the United Farm Workers (UFW) also declined; union membership fell from more than 60,000 in the 1970s to only 6,000 by 2003. Anthony Chávez, son of the UFW's founder, attempted to revitalize the union with low-income housing projects and a fledgling radio network (*Radio Campesina*) offering programs on workers' rights.

Employers of agricultural labor turned increasingly to the use of farm-labor contractors. The subsequent decline in wages, benefits, and working conditions for California's agricultural workers amounted to a counterrevolution in the fields. In 1990 a federal investigation revealed that only 40 percent of the harvesters in the San Joaquin Valley had toilets or hand-washing facilities available at the job sites. Incidents of hepatitis and related health problems were on the rise; compensation was rarely above the minimum wage. Conditions in some areas were comparable to what they had been during the depression a half century earlier.

California farmers also faced the challenge of increased foreign competition as trade barriers around the world were reduced. Growers of specialty crops—such as broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus, and tomatoes—encountered particularly strong competition from Mexican farmers following congressional approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993. NAFTA tended to benefit, however, the state's beef and dairy industries as well as its growers of apples, pears, and nuts.

In the early 2000s, more than half the state's cotton, rice, and wheat was being sold abroad. Annual exports of California food products exceeded \$9 billion, with more than half the state's agricultural exports being shipped to the nations of the Pacific Rim.

As California entered the twenty-first century, its economy had been transformed. Traditional industries, such as defense and aerospace, had declined and new ones had risen to take their place. The state found itself at the vital center of the global New Economy of high technology and e-commerce. But economists cautioned that the state's continued prosperity was threatened by the very growth it had produced. "This growing prosperity attracts even more new residents to California and increases pressures on land, the environment, and quality of life," explained Stephen Levy. "This is the paradox of a strong economy." Practitioners of the New Economy, added Levy, demanded "good schools, clean air and water, efficient transportation, excellent public services, and great recreational and cultural amenities—in short, a high quality of life." The state's future prosperity absolutely *depended* on Californians taking bold action to protect the environment and improve basic services. If such action was not taken, warned Levy, "we won't have this economy."

Selected Bibliography

The best available survey of the contemporary economy is *California Economic Growth* (2005), published annually by the Center for Continuing Study of the California Economy. See also the earlier surveys in Dan Walters, *The New California* (1992), and Joel Kotkin and Paul Grabowicz, *California, Inc.* (1982).

The literature on the Sunbelt is extensive. The term was coined by political strategist Kevin Phillips in his 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*. Other studies include