

West Hawaii Today

[Print Page](#)

Dry weather stunts coffee season

About 30 percent of crop underdeveloped

by Carolyn Lucas
West Hawaii Today
clucas@westhawaii.com
 Friday, September 21, 2007 9:19 AM HST



Coffee picker Nelson Tabora works Thursday at a North Kona coffee farm. - Photos By Michael Darden | West Hawaii Today

Big flowerings in January and February gave Kona coffee farmers hope for a record season, but the lack of rain stunted approximately 30 percent of the cherries' growth, said Trent Bateman, Mountain Thunder Coffee Plantation owner.

"Weather plays an important role. It can make or break the crop," he said. "Drought will cause floaters (underdeveloped coffee cherry). High winds and super heavy rain can damage the flowers. In this case, receiving the necessary rain immediately after flowering was key. Only about 70 percent of the flowers became mature cherry."

Still, coffee farmers and processors expected this year's crop to produce a higher yield of beans than last year and noted additional acreage planted.

According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service Hawaii Field Office, 2.8 million pounds of green bean were harvested, processed and milled last year.

Bateman anticipated this year's crop to be 15 percent -- 420,000 pounds -- larger with the possibility of no extra fancy, the largest beans and highest grade of Kona coffee. He said extra fancy is highly requested by consumers in Japan and Gevalia Kaffe. Some companies, he added, may have to rethink the way they do business.

Ken Sheppard, Kona Coffee Farmers Association president, said it is difficult and too early to predict this season's outlook. Still, Sheppard is optimistic about a "reasonable" size crop, which he anticipates coming in one or two big rounds. Sheppard did not foresee an extended coffee season.

Coffee is harvested annually, with lower elevation areas beginning as early as June and higher elevations finishing as late as April. However, the bulk of the state's harvesting takes place from September through December.

Coffee cherries are picked once they turn bright red. Since coffee cherries do not ripen simultaneously, each tree is handpicked often throughout the season, in some cases as many as eight times.

Donna Woolley, Kona Coffee Council president, said picking started in August at Island Sun Coffee, a 3-acre farm located at the 1,000-foot elevation. She estimated about 3,500 pounds have been picked. Based on observations of her trees and remarks made casually, Woolley thinks it will be a "good," but short season.

Some warned a smaller yield or shorter season could drive up prices slightly as well as lower sales. Others insisted that prices would remain stable and the consumer will feel no effects.

Cherry prices were cited Thursday to average between \$1.30 and \$1.40 per pound. Last year's peak cherry price was \$1.55 per pound. It takes almost 6 pounds of cherries to produce 1 pound of green coffee.

"We are hopeful that the price remains steady, especially after what happened last year. There were price wars. Buyers basically shot themselves in the foot by selling low and buying high," Bateman said. "We also learned coffee gets resistance if it becomes too expensive. A 5 cent raise on cherry will cause a 30 cent increase on green bean. Eventually people began purchasing coffee from Kauai or Jamaica."

Nevertheless, the demand for Kona coffee has remained strong. Hawaii is the only state in the nation where coffee is grown commercially. This world-renowned, heritage crop is relatively small when compared to its global counterparts.

Sheppard claimed local farmers tend to sell out annually before the new harvest. He noted those in the industry are planting more acreage and owners of small coffee estates have mentioned an increase in Internet sales.

Woolley attributed the continuing demand to efforts of those involved in the various coffee associations, festivals and the state. She said they have increase public awareness and elevated the status of Kona coffee.

Sheppard said each coffee has diverse tastes just as fine vintage wines do. The variety possesses many unique floral attributes that make it a prized gourmet coffee. It is the second most expensive coffee, following Jamaica Blue Mountain, one of its strongest competitors, he said.

There are currently 630 farmers cultivating coffee on the western slopes of Mauna Loa and Hualalai in the Kona districts between 500 and 2,200-foot elevations. The average coffee field is roughly 5 acres, Sheppard said.

Coffee acreage in the North and South Kona districts was 3,350 acres last season. The remaining coffee fields, totaling 450 acres, are spread throughout the other districts, stated a Jan. 23 report titled "Hawaii Coffee" by the National Agricultural Statistics Service Hawaii Field Office.

COFFEE BY THE NUMBERS

70 percent of blossoms have become cherries

6 pounds of cherries to produce 1 pound of green coffee

15 percent larger crop expected this year