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The Desert Sun

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2012

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SERVING THE COACHELLA VALLEY SINCE 1927

Date harvest 'in excellent shape'

Summer's extreme weather produced record harvest for area growers

By Denise Goolsby
 The Desert Sun

The heat and high humidity that besieged the Coachella Valley this summer had area date farmers worried. Strong winds and a fierce rainstorm that struck over a two-day period in mid-September prematurely blew dates off the branches and into cloth bags covering the bushels of fruit hanging from date palm trees at Hadley Date Gardens in Thermal.

"We had to scramble after the storm," said owner Albert Keck. "It was quite an ordeal. We had to take emergency action and bring down all the dates."

But the Hadley dates were saved (Keck's crew dried out the fruit, keeping losses to a minimum) and the summer's weather extremes produced a particularly good, and potentially record-setting, date crop this season, local growers say.

"You can never second-guess mother nature," said Bob Har- rick, general manager of Oasis Date Gardens in Thermal.

Please see DATES, A6



Date harvesters Leticia Garcia (left) and Diana Lopez pick dates at the Oasis Date Gardens in Thermal on Tuesday. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

ONLINE

Visit mydesert.com/video for a short look at the 2012 date harvest and mydesert.com/photos for more pictures of the Coachella Valley date scene.

ELECTION 2012



Romney dominates as Obama plays safe

Impact unclear in key states like Ohio

By Ben Feller
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republican Mitt Romney was fiery and having fun. President Barack Obama came off as the professor without much pop.

And while Democrats grudgingly conceded that Romney did well in Wednesday's first presidential debate, what matters is whether he changed the dynamic of a race that he appeared to be losing.

The best answers will come over the next few days: Did the debate help Romney close his polling deficit in a must-win state such as Ohio? Or pull ahead in Florida, Virginia or the other toss-up states where Obama holds a slender lead?

The judging is best done in view of what Obama and Romney set out to do.

By that measure, Romney may not have changed the game, but he sure played it well. Obama avoided any gaffes but looked surprisingly lackluster at times.

'47%' not mentioned

And he kept in his pocket one of the strongest weapons of his political arsenal, Romney's secretly videotaped remarks to donors that "47 percent" of Americans see themselves as entitled victims and that he could not persuade them to "take personal responsibility and care for their lives."

The president never mentioned it over the 90-minute debate, even though he talks about it daily in his campaigning.

The president's biggest trouble seemed to be that he got caught up in exactly what he wanted to avoid — engaging Romney time and again on the challenger's accusations instead of turning each answer

Please see DEBATE, A7

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ENERGY SUMMIT

Investing in green energy

Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom touts renewable development at forum

By K Kaufmann
 The Desert Sun

PALM SPRINGS — For California to meet the challenge of global competition, it needs a "low-carbon, green-growth economy," driven by its ambitious greenhouse gas reduction goals and the grassroots efforts of local governments.

The message Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom brought to the Southern California Energy Summit Thursday in Palm Springs was one the audience of several hundred local and state officials and green business leaders were hungry to hear.

"We have here in California something unique — that is the will to step up where the U.S. walked away. All we're doing is rolling greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. The opportunity that sets forth for all of you is extraordinary," he said.

"Green energy is the future, today and tomorrow, for this part of the state. We must invest in the future."

Some of that investment could come from the state's

Please see ENERGY, A6



Michael Lucas of ALL LED demonstrates alternatives to high energy consumption lights at the Southern California Energy Summit Thursday at the Palm Springs Convention Center. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

LIVE COVERAGE

Follow renewable energy reporter K Kaufmann, @kkaufmann on Twitter, throughout the two-day summit.

Real estate experts convene to offer industry insights

By Mike Perrault
 The Desert Sun

When commercial real estate experts gather in Rancho Mirage this morning for an annual conference, there will be talk of how the recession-beleaguered Coachella Valley market's double-digit vacancy rates are edging ever so slowly to-

ward recovery — as well as a few possible surprises.

Speaker Susan Harvey, for instance, may dispel any misconceptions that land sales have all but dried up in the valley over the past year.

"That's absolutely far from the truth," said Harvey, principal with Palm Desert-based Desert Pacific Properties.

"There were 7,667 acres sold and 938 residential lots, an increase of 25 percent" during the past 12 months that ended in September.

Investors looking to generate revenue streams by buying buildings at less than the replacement cost to build them shelled out \$1 million or more each for more than 200 commer-

cial properties across the valley last year, said Kathleen Howard, executive vice president of NAI Capital in Palm Desert.

Harvey and Howard are among speakers and panelists slated for the ninth annual Commercial Real Estate Investment Forum from 7 to 11:30 a.m. today

Please see PROPERTY, A7

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

A Desert Sun iSun Investigation took a closer look at Coachella Valley commercial real estate vacancies of about 1,000 storefronts. The desert's vacancy rate is 18.2 percent. Read the stories and check out an interactive database of those 1,000 storefronts at mydesert.com/vacancies

GOOD MORNING

The feeling of fall

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Advice **W13** Opinion **B7**
 Bridge **D5** Puzzles **D3**
 Crossword **D4** Starwatch **B5**
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INSIDE TODAY'S PAPER

RAMOS LEAVES
 Brad Ramos resigns from force. **B1**

OPEN SEAT
 School board hopefuls answer questions. **B3**

PERFECT PLACE TO PLAY
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Dates

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"We're relating it to the moisture and humidity ... they're in excellent shape."

The soft, brown, wrinkly skinned tree fruit that is at once sweet and chewy ripened about two weeks earlier than expected this year, and the result is a high-quality Medjool harvest, which is already wrapping up for the season as local companies ship their fruit as far as the Middle East.

In Thermal, two record temperature highs were set — and another one equaled — just since Saturday, capping off a summer of above average

heat. But unlike farmers in the Midwest whose corn crops were devastated by drought, the extreme weather only boosted date production.

The number of dates harvested across the valley is expected to be higher than the 25 million-pound haul in 2011, according to Lorrie Cooper, manager of the Indio-based California Date Administrative Committee.

"The fruit looks really good," she said. "We're hoping to hit 26 million."

Close to 53 million pounds of dates were harvested in Riverside County in 2011, an increase of 10 million pounds over 2010 and demand shows no signs of slowing. The spike was due, at least in part, to more acreage be-

ing harvested and last year's date crop was valued at over \$41 million.

Oasis Date Gardens harvests 14 different varieties of dates, but Medjools account for the bulk of its business. Harrick estimates it will ship close to 1½ million pounds of dates this year, to points across the globe including the Netherlands, Australia, Morocco and Qatar. About 40 percent of its harvest is sold internationally.

Domestically, dates are sold primarily to customers in New York, Florida, Texas, California, Arizona and Nevada but, says Harrick.

Coachella Valley residents will find his Medjools at Jensen's Finest Foods and Ralphs — in

TOP 10 CROPS IN RIVERSIDE COUNTY, 2011

1. Nursery stock - \$200 million
2. Milk - \$192 million
3. Table grapes - \$118 million
4. Hay - \$101 million
5. Bell peppers - \$85 million
6. Eggs - \$82 million
7. Lemons - \$75 million
8. Avocados - \$60 million
9. Dates - \$41 million
10. Cotton - \$38 million



Workers sort dates by size and quality at the Oasis Date Gardens in Thermal. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

clear plastic clamshell containers in the produce department.

In the Middle East, the Medjools — the largest and the moistest of all varieties — are considered the crown jewel of dates.

"We ship them during Ramadan to some of the royal families in the Middle East," he said.

Dates, along with yogurt or milk, are traditionally one of the first foods eaten when Muslims break their Ramadan fast after sundown.

The date palm was introduced to Southern California and Mexico by the Spaniards in the late 18th century, but gained an economic foothold in the Coachella Valley in the early 1900s when local farmers imported offshoots of commercial varieties from Africa and the Middle East.

"The industry really got a boost during World War II," Indio historian Pat Lafflin told The Desert

Sun in 2011. "The military bought a lot of dates to put in ration packages for soldiers."

The men who work in the date gardens do much of the heavy lifting work — including clambering up the multiple-story trees to pollinate the fruit — but the female workers are entrusted with the final product.

The women work quickly — one holds a round, shallow basket while another slides the ripe fruit down long, slim strands.

"Women are better with their fingers, they're more delicate with the fruit," Harrick said.

Once the fruit is plucked from a stand of short palms, the five-woman team climbs into an enclosed platform on a forklift, and after buckling their harnesses, are lifted into the taller trees. They fill their baskets and lower the harvest to a worker below.

Once plucked, the soft orbs won't sit in the sun

for long.

"We get them immediately in the freezer for a minimum of four days," said Harrick. "It protects the integrity of the product and its shelf-life."

Dates kept in a freezer can last up to a year and a half. In a refrigerator, the life span drops to six months. Leave them on your kitchen counter only if you're planning to consume them relatively quickly.

"Each (variety of date) has its own unique taste," said Erica Espinoza, a clerk at the Oasis gift shop. "I like mine semi-dry. They're not as sweet so I can eat and enjoy more of them."

She's partial to Zahidis — she eats them straight up — but when it comes to Medjools, she has a little more fun with this fruit.

"We put them in salads, and we eat them with peanut butter," she said.

"It's so sweet and the saltiness of the peanut butter is the perfect combination."



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Energy

Continued from A1

soon-to-start cap and trade system, where large businesses with high levels of greenhouse gas emissions will buy and sell carbon credits, he said. The revenue from the program, projected at \$660 million to \$2 billion, is earmarked for renewable development, he said.

Newsom's keynote to the two-day summit, which continues today at the Palm Springs Convention Center, provided a high-energy jolt to a day of panels and speakers talking mostly about familiar and longstanding permitting issues for large-scale renewable energy projects and state and federal government initiatives.

"He seems like he's the real thing," said Mark Weber, manager of the Coachella Valley Enterprise Zone, which provides incentives for businesses locating in a 56-mile stretch of the valley from Thousand Palms to Mecca.

"We had a state leader focus on the job creation side of renewable energy; that was huge," he said.

"I can't think of one line I didn't agree with," said Joe Wallace, chief executive of the Coachella Valley iHub, the region's



Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks at the Southern California Energy Summit held at the Palm Springs Convention Center on Thursday. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

green business incubator in Palm Springs.

Citing Imperial County's staggering 29 percent unemployment rate, Newsom zeroed in on the state's loss of its competitive edge in recent years, the result of funding cuts to education and research and a failure to appreciate the threat from other states and countries that have more aggressively pursued economic development.

"We're not just competing with cheap labor; we're competing with cheap genius," he said. "We have got to wake up."

Local and national economies do better when they embrace green initiatives, Newsom argued, pointing to the high economic growth of a handful of countries that reduced their emissions to 1990 levels under the 1992 Kyoto Protocol and his own hometown of San Francisco, which passed a mandatory composting law while he was mayor.

"Cities are laboratories of innovation," he said. "If you don't like the way things look when you stand up, stand on your head; go local."

Joan Taylor, chair of Sierra Club's California-Nevada desert energy committee, found Newsom's speech intriguing but was disappointed he didn't speak more about rooftop solar.

"The elephant in the room is distributed gener-

ation," she said, using another term for local, rooftop power generation. "It's going to be too cheap not to install and it won't need policy initiatives."

Other valley business and green tech officials said the region is poised to take advantage of the kind of opportunities and economic growth Newsom envisioned.

"He's spot on recognizing the importance of making sure (cap and trade) revenues go to green initiatives," said Art Kimball, project coordinator of a green tech career academy at Desert Mirage High School in Thermal. "It validates what we're doing; our students are graduating to jobs that are going to exist."

Thomas Flavin, CEO of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership, which is working to diversify the region's economy, agreed with Newsom's call for a new spirit of economic competitiveness.

"The Coachella Valley is uniquely positioned to be a leader because the Coachella Valley still has a sense of common purpose, which means important things can get done," he said.

K Kaufmann covers energy and green technology and health care for The Desert Sun and writes the Green Desert blog. Reach her at k.kaufmann@thedesertsun.com or (760) 778-4622.

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