

Plum Confusing

Pluots' classification decision may mean big bucks for marketers.

By Dennis Pollock

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Pluots are not on trial.

But they are undergoing DNA testing.

That's the latest development in the convoluted quest to determine just how to market a fruit that is gobbling up a big slice of the Valley's plum pie.

The testing is aimed at helping shape a definitive answer on how to classify the fruit that is a cross between a plum and an apricot, said Blair Richardson, president of the Reedley-based California Tree Fruit Agreement.

The perplexing question with a big price tag is just where does the pluot fit into the plum marketing picture.

If it's officially designated a plum, that would mean its growers could end up paying the same assessments the state government levies on plums: 20 cents for each 28-pound box. Because there may be as many as five million boxes of pluots produced this year in the Valley, that makes it a million dollar question. Pluot growers do not currently pay assessments to the Reedley organization.

If it's designated a separate fruit, its growers might want to form their own marketing group and pay to promote and study it.

But Richardson and other industry leaders are quick to point out that the defining of a pluot goes far beyond any quibbling over who pays what.

"It's confusing to the grower and to the supermarket chain buyers," said Jim Krause, vice president for Corrin Produce Sales Inc. in Reedley.

"If the buyer puts a plum sticker on a pluot, that constitutes mislabeling, but there is no pluot sticker."

Richardson said recent research compounded the confusion.

The Reedley organization conducted initial tests that seemed to show the DNA for some of the major pluot varieties was indistinguishable from traditional plum varieties. Some scientists have questioned that testing and a second laboratory will be used to confirm findings. A task force is being formed to look into the matter.

"The issue is rather problematic," Richardson said. "Of course, CTFA would like to see the confusion resolved, but we want to be careful our decisions are based on sound science and not speculation."

Steve Strong, chairman of the California Plum Marketing Board, said his role is that of "a steward of neutrality" in marshaling the task force, which is expected to include scientists and growers of peaches and nectarines as well as plums.

At its spring meeting, the California Tree Fruit Agreement committees on peaches and nectarines approved a policy that states that if a fruit appears to be a peach or nectarine -- and common spray permits are used -- it's classified accordingly unless it can be scientifically proven the fruit is something different.

The same policy was proposed for plums but was tabled, pending the outcome of the task force study.

Because of the strong demand for pluots, which look very much like plums and often command a higher price, growers have increasingly planted them as replacements for standard varieties of plums. The crop of traditional plum varieties out of the Valley will be substantial this year, estimated at some 16 million boxes but nowhere near the 20-million plus volume the state once produced. The reporter can be reached at dpollock@fresnobee.com or 441-6364.