

Commodity Highlight: Dry-bulb Onions

Dry-bulb onions (*Allium cepa*) are classified as members of the amaryllis family but are also sometimes included as members of the lily family. A cool-season crop, onions are botanically related to shallots, garlic, leeks, and chives. Onions are believed to have originated in the regions around Iran and Pakistan.

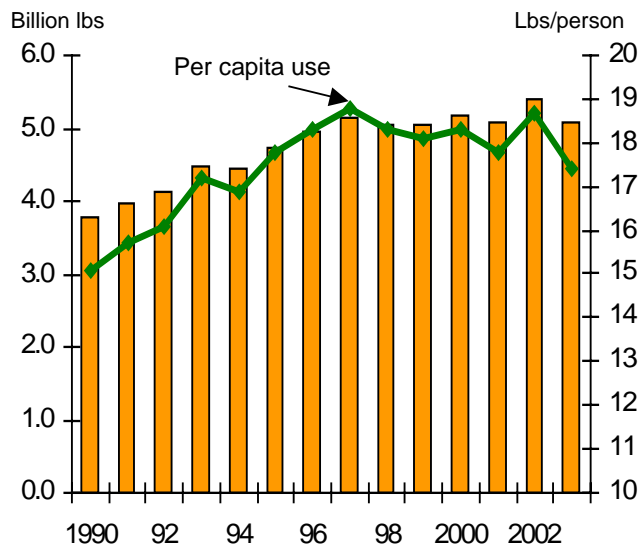
The two major categories of bulb onions are known as spring/summer varieties and storage varieties. Both types can be yellow, white, or red. Spring/summer varieties (e.g. Vidalia, Texas 1015, etc) are characterized by their fragility, mild flavor, and shorter shelf life. Storage varieties (including those used for processing), which are harvested during the late summer and fall, account for three-fourths of the U.S. onion market. These varieties tend to have a stronger, more pungent flavor and are well suited for longer-term (up to 8 months) storage and processing.

The United States is the world's third-largest producer of onions with 6 percent of the 111 billion pounds grown in 2002--China (31 percent) and India (10 percent) are the leading producers. U.S. dry-bulb onions are produced on 3,296 farms (1997 Census), with 14 percent of these farms in California.

California is the top U.S. producer of onions, averaging 28 percent of the crop during 2000-02. California produces most of the onions destined for dehydration, with about half of the State's crop used to manufacture products like onion powder and flakes. Oregon (15 percent), Washington (13 percent), Idaho (7 percent), and Colorado (6 percent) round out the top five states.

Onions are a versatile vegetable used in fresh, canned, frozen, and dehydrated forms, with the fresh market accounting for the largest share of onion use. Onions place fifth among all U.S. vegetables in per capita consumption. Consumption of all onions in 2002 was 5.7 billion pounds (5.4 billion was fresh-market). This was the equivalent of 19.7 pounds per capita--just under the record-high of 20.4 pounds set in 1999. Fresh-market onions accounted for the majority of use

Figure 8
U.S. fresh dry-bulb onions: Consumption *



* Excludes dehydration. Source: ERS, USDA.

(18.5 pounds in 2002) with onions for dehydration amounting to 1.2 pounds per capita in 2002.

From 2000 to 2002, the farm value of the onion crop averaged \$732 million--5 percent of farm cash receipts for all vegetables. The estimated consumer value of onions is over \$2 billion.

In 2002, exports (including seed) totaled \$180 million, while imports were \$164 million. Imports accounted for 11 percent of the fresh-market onions consumed in the United States in 2002, while exports took 8 percent of available supplies. Most imports are fresh-market onions, while both fresh and dried onion products are major components of exports. Three-fourths of all fresh-market onion imports enter the U.S. market during the winter months--about the same time that U.S. fresh-market onion exports reach a seasonal lull. The majority of fresh-market onion imports come from Mexico, Canada, and Peru, while Canada, Japan, and Mexico are major markets for U.S. exports.

Table 17--U.S. fresh dry-bulb onions: Supply, utilization, and price

Year	Supply				Utilization				Season-ave price				
	Prod- uction 1/	Imports 2/	Begin- ning stocks	Total	Exports 2/	Shrink & loss 1/	Ending stocks 3/	Domestic	Per capita use	Current dollars 1/	Constant 1996 dollars 4/		
-- Million pounds --										Pounds		-- \$/cwt --	
1970	2,602	83	446	3,131	147	350	554	2,080	10.1	3.67	12.53		
1980	2,902	143	758	3,803	297	297	618	2,592	11.4	11.40	19.86		
1990	4,397	382	836	5,615	378	602	867	3,767	15.1	10.50	12.14		
1999	6,101	584	1,163	7,848	668	870	1,264	5,047	18.1	9.78	9.34		
2000	6,042	483	1,264	7,789	768	658	1,185	5,179	18.3	11.30	10.57		
2001	5,853	639	1,185	7,677	719	604	1,267	5,086	17.8	11.40	10.42		
2002	5,851	605	1,267	7,723	639	584	1,110	5,390	18.7	12.40	11.21		
2003 f	5,625	715	1,110	7,450	690	562	1,124	5,074	17.4	--	--		

-- = not available. f = ERS forecast. 1/ Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA. 2/ Source is Bureau of the Census, USDC. 3/ Approximated by ERS from State marketings and industry data. 4/ Deflated by the GDP implicit price deflator, 1996=100.