

Singin' 'Song of the South'

The Mesilla Valley shows decreased chile production

By **Samantha Roberts**
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*"Well mamma got sick and daddy got down
The county got the farm and they moved to town
Pappa got a job with the TVA
He bought a washing machine and then a
Chevrolet"*

— "Song of the South" by Alabama

Just like the song by Alabama, the message remains true for the chile industry in the Mesilla Valley. Over the past 20 years, southern New Mexico has seen acres of chile crops diminish by the thousands.

Though 2011 may actually prove to be slightly better than 2010, numbers don't lie and the fact is that chile — by which New Mexico is identified by — is not the state's No. 1 crop economically.

In 1992, 34,500 acres of chile were planted in the Mesilla Valley, and in 2010, that number sat closer to 8,700 acres.

"The trend has been downward for a long time," said Longino Bustillos, director of the National Agricultural Statistics Service New Mexico Field Office.

According to farmers and researchers in the area, there are main factors that contribute to this downward spiral, such as labor reforms, costs, lack of mechanization, disease and competition.

"Where do I start?" asked Jeff Anderson, Doña Ana County agent of agronomy and horticulture. "I have so many things running through my head about why the chile crops are disappearing."

While Anderson said water is not a typical factor for the crop, this year, the drought had



Las Cruces Bulletin photo by Niki Rhynes

Paul Bosland, co-founder of the Chile Pepper Institute on the New Mexico State University campus holds a green chile and a pinto chile — a green chile that has begun to turn red. Due to many economic factors, chile production in New Mexico has been on a downward production slope for more than 20 years.

an affect.

"Chile is a contracted crop and you don't grow it unless you have water, but even with water it is still difficult," he said.

Perhaps one of the biggest factors contributing to decreased chile acreage is labor.

"We have some stiff competition," said Dino Cervantes, vice president of Cervantes Enterprise, a chile producer in Vado, N.M. "Other countries, such as Peru, all of South America, Brazil, Central Mexico and even China, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, are big chile producers. And in some areas, such as China, they are paying their workers \$2 maybe \$5 a day. We can't compete when we are paying our workers \$7, \$8, \$10 an hour."

"The bad thing is, in places such as China, we don't know what kind of chemicals or toxins

they use in their fields or if they have rats and bugs running on their crops," Anderson said. "Since our demand for chile is going up, we are having to import it from other countries."

"We have to take the labor out of chile in order to compete," Cervantes said.

But the lack of mechanization is keeping workers in the chile fields, picking the vegetable and simultaneously de-stemming the product.

"It is a labor-intensive crop," said Stephanie Walker, a vegetable specialist with New Mexico State University. "In order for the product to go to the processing plant, the stems have to be removed, and there is no mechanical way to do it. If the stems aren't removed, it makes the product inedible and taste woody."

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