

# Business

## MAJOR CRACK IN NUT THEFTS IS RELIEF TO S.J. GROWERS

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Rural-crime investigators believe they have cracked a string of truckload-size thefts of almonds and walnuts after recovering nearly 70 tons of nuts and arresting two men in a Sacramento warehouse this week.

That was good news for Dave Phippen, whose Ripon/Manteca-area almond growing and packing company had two truckloads, or 88,000 pounds, of nuts stolen in July. Investigators reported recovering 9,700 pounds of those nuts.

"Well, I'm just tickled, not so much because of the recovery but to know, hopefully, those guys are out of business," Phippen said Tuesday.

Arrested by Sacramento authorities on suspicion of possessing stolen property were Sukhwinder Singh Grewal, 41, and Amrik Singh, 27. Investigators from San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties, where the thefts occurred, continued Tuesday to go over evidence seized at the warehouse before deciding what additional charges, if any, the pair may face.

Grewal is the owner of Sona Spice Imports, a Sacramento-based importer and wholesaler of goods from India, the Associated Press reported.

Calls to Sona Spice Co. were answered Tuesday by Grewal's wife, Ravinder Grewal, who said her husband had been released on bail and was looking for a lawyer.

"Police have his cell phone and computer," she told the AP. "We're very scared. We have no idea what they're doing."

Ravinder Grewal said she had never met Amrik Singh and that he did not work for Sona Spice Co.

Authorities acting on a tip of suspicious activity Sunday were led to a warehouse at 2040 Railroad Drive in Sacramento, where they reportedly found workers repackaging almonds, shifting them from branded cartons to generic boxes. Police detained 11 people found at the facility.

From there and another warehouse in West Sacramento, detectives recovered 123,675 pounds of almonds and 13,080 pounds of walnuts, with a total value of more than \$400,000.

Detective Frank Dorris of the San Joaquin County Sheriff's Office, a member of the Rural Crime Task Force, said the tip came from a relative of the Sacramento warehouse owner who was helping manage the property.

"He was over Sunday morning, and he noticed they were off packing almonds from one box to another box," Dorris said.

A search warrant was served on the warehouse late Sunday and Grewal and Singh were arrested early Monday.

Deputy Royjindar Singh of the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Office, who is not related to Amrik Singh, said the other occupants of the warehouse were Sona Spice employees, and they were unaware that any illegal activities were occurring.

"The workers were just doing what they were told," he said Tuesday.

Royjinder Singh also said the arrests and seizures cleared up most of the outstanding almond and walnut thefts over the past year. Most cases involved full truckloads of nuts being stolen while left parked at processing plants or in trucking-company storage yards.

"There might be one that is still outstanding," he said, adding: "This investigation is still ongoing, and there's hope they might be able to connect those thefts to this group."

The full scope of the Sacramento operation will become clearer after investigators finish combing through evidence seized, Singh said.

"These guys kept pretty good records of what they where doing," he noted.

Dorris anticipates the suspects will soon face additional charges.

"We're going to get with the three counties and decide which way we're going to go with that and who's going to prosecute them," he said.

California growers produce about 80 percent of the world's almonds, roughly two-thirds of which are exported.

According to county agricultural commissioners' reports, the state's 2005 almond crop accounted for nearly \$2.9 billion in gross farm sales.

San Joaquin County is a major almond producer, with a 2005 crop value of \$172 million. For the region, that is only exceeded by milk at \$325 million and winegrapes at \$189 million.

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