

By *Tim Linden*

California Season Has Excellent Start

From day one of the 2020 California avocado season, both volume and the grove price have surpassed expectations. Of course, the two go hand in hand with the latter influencing the former.

As handlers survey the situation, they observe that this season is on track to offer more weeks with a significant volume of fruit shipped from California than any season in the recent past. By mid-May, California had sent about 140 million pounds of fruit to market. The quick pace began in February with the first more than five-million-pound week occurring in the middle of the month, and about 10 million pounds shipped by the last week of the month. Three of the four weeks in March topped 8 million pounds and a four-week stretch in April /May may turn out to be the heaviest shipping period of the season, with more than 67 million pounds.

Handlers said there are several reasons for the early start of the season including good grove prices, great early sizing, and more small fruit and No. 2's coming from Mexico. They also reported that the large size of the crop, optimum marketing strategies and coronavirus social distancing rules are combining to extend the season, with good shipments expected in October and some shipments as late as mid-November. In 2020, the California avocado season is projected to have a full 42 weeks with shipments topping the one-million-pound mark. There were 26 of those weeks in 2019, 38 of them in 2018.

Echoing the sentiments of every handler interviewed, in mid-May Rankin McDaniel Sr. of McDaniel Fruit

Co., said: "The California crop is moving very well. The prices on avocados have been very stable. The price for the premium retail sizes have been as good as we could have expected." He noted that the quality was excellent, and his company was a bit ahead of schedule on their California shipments.

Gary Caloroso of The Giumarra Companies concurred, noting that grower returns have been good. "We are very pleased with how the season has gone so far," he said, adding that Giumarra should have volume shipments of California fruit through Labor Day.

Ross Wileman of Mission Produce specifically pointed to the high percentage of No. 2's coming out of Mexico this spring as an incentive for California growers to be more aggressive in picking their fruit. "Mexico has been running at about 30% on No. 2's," he said. That created extra demand for larger fruit and a better grove price than anticipated this spring.

Rob Wedin of Calavo Growers Inc. said that by the end of April, Calavo had marketed 41% of its expected California volume and will top 50% by the end of May. He said the high grove prices convinced a lot of growers to pick early. That allowed them to relieve some stress on the trees as those trees try to set next year's crop, and it also let them lock in some very respectable prices for a significant portion of their fruit.

Giovanni Cavaletto of Index Fresh said that the grower-owned company had only shipped about 25% of its California fruit by the end of April. He said Index will handle good volumes through the summer. April rains delivered "a good shot in the arm" for grow-

ers, helping to increase the size of the fruit and extending the shelf life. He said the company will have excellent quality throughout the summer and especially noted its increasing crop of the Gem variety. "Over the years, there have been a lot of new varieties, but Hass has always outperformed them," he said. "We think Gem has the potential to come up to the Hass standards. It has a very nice oval shape, with a beautiful golden color and is an easy peeler."

Wedin expects stable prices to continue through the summer though there could be a small downward price adjustment. Reports from Peru indicate that it will ship a bit more than last season to the U.S. Mexico is expected to see its shipments steadily decline as the official end of its 2019/2020 season arrives on July 1. Its summer crop is expected to be about 20% greater than last year.

Add all three major origins together and it points to weekly summer volumes in the 60-million-pound range. While that would have been a daunting figure a handful of years ago, now it seems doable. Though handlers do say that there is more uncertainty this year than usual largely because of the coronavirus and how it might impact summer life.

Bob Lucy of Del Rey Avocado Company weighed in with one more significant impact to the 2020 season and that is COVID-19. He revealed that social distancing rules have led his firm to reduce the number of packing hours per week and consequently decrease weekly production. Lucy expects this to lengthen the season and anticipates that production from San Diego, Riverside and Ventura Counties will go into October with Morro Bay still shipping fruit in November. This could allow more of the California fruit to end up in reopened foodservice venues.

It's always a risk to hold the fruit on the trees waiting for a strong market, but this year's large crop may make that a necessity. 🥑