

By Tim Linden

Hawaii Gains Limited Access to Mainland Market

Last fall, the Animal Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved a protocol framework for the shipping of Sharwil avocados to 32 states during the November-March time frame. Representatives of the Hawaiian industry and APHIS worked out an implementation agreement by early April of this year, and there is every expectation that some fruit will be shipped later this year.

"It's going to start very slow," said grower Tom Benton, who is also the president of the Hawaii Avocado Association. "California doesn't have to worry about us for a long time."

Benton said Hawaii produces an average of about 1.5 million pounds of avocados annually with most harvested from October into May. Of course that number fluctuates as avocado groves in Hawaii follow a similar pattern to that of their California cousins with volume having the ability to fluctuate significantly from year to year.

Many decades ago, Hawaii did ship avocados to the mainland, and again in 1990/91 it had a two-year shipping window. At that time, the Sharwil was determined to not be a fruit fly host so shipments were allowed. Benton explained that eventually some fruit flies were found in dropped fruit and APHIS altered the shipment protocol. "APHIS did establish a cold treatment protocol but it wasn't viable and nobody used it."

For the past 15 years, Benton

and others have been petitioning APHIS to classify Sharwil avocados as a "poor host" for the fruit fly and establish an accompanying protocol. "They finally agreed last year."

Benton, who has been on the Hawaii Avocado Association board for 25 years and its president for most of the past decade, said the industry is excited about being able to ship to the mainland. The vast majority of avocados produced in the state are sold for consumption by residents and tourists in Oahu and Maui. But he said avocados from Mexico often offer a lower cost alternative and when Hawaii has a heavy production year, it is difficult to find a home for the entire production within the state. Some packer/shippers do send some fruit to Canada and Asia but sales are limited.

Based on his experience in shipping the Sharwil avocados to the mainland U.S. in 1990 and 1991, Benton is optimistic that he will find buyers for his Hawaiian avocados. "Back then Hass avocados were selling for \$25 per box and I was able to sell Sharwils for \$40. I believe there will be a gourmet market for the Sharwil."

He expects that the limited volume that will be shipped this year will be flown to the Mainland via air container. One hurdle to overcome is that very few of the larger planes that carry those LD3 containers fly in and out of the island of Hawaii, where most of the avocados are commercially grown.



Benton acknowledges that the advent of Mexico into the U.S. marketplace has changed the dynamic tremendously since the early 1990s, but he still believes there is a market for the Sharwil and because of limited volume initially he expects demand to exceed supply as Hawaiian shippers establish relationships with buyers. "It's an excellent piece of fruit with all the attributes people desire. It is super consistent with a small seed. It stays green, has nice shelf life and has an average size of a half-pound to a pound."

He said most growers in Hawaii are fairly small, averaging five acres or less. Benton said the largest avocado grove in Hawaii is about 50 acres. But there is available land and he expects some increased acreage if and when shipping to the mainland proves profitable. Most of the acreage is on Hawaii, near Kona and, according to Benton, relies on Mother Nature for irrigation. He said getting consistent rainfall is probably the number one cultural problem, with 6,000 pounds per acre being an average yield. 