



Commission Forges Partnership with Cal Poly at Historic Pine Tree Ranch

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A-1 Tree Service makes quick work chipping the old lemon acreage.

Nearly three years after the idea was first introduced to the California Avocado Commission Board of Directors, on July 1, 2013, CAC management executed a long term ground lease with the Cal Poly Foundation for 11 acres of land located at historic Pine Tree Ranch in Santa Paula.

The leased acreage, coined a “demonstration grove”, is centrally located in Ventura County, between north and south avocado growing regions, and will serve as the site where CAC can test and demonstrate, through hands-on grower field days, cultural management practices and research results. This is an effort designed to achieve the commission’s mission of improving grower sustainability through better grower communications and education,

The journey to this day began mid-2010 with a meeting between CAC and Cal Poly management to discuss the opportunity of the commission leasing the entire Pine Tree Ranch parcel consisting of nearly 60 acres, an old historic house and multiple outbuildings. At that time, CAC was beginning to explore the idea of having a northern office situated on or close to a demonstration grove and the Foundation was in need of both a revenue stream and activity at the ranch to bring some life to the location. The idea of a demonstration grove originated with the commission’s

Production Research Committee, as a way to supplement—but not replace—the role of grower cooperators who volunteered acreage for research and education.

Initially, a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was developed to keep CAC and the Foundation at the negotiating table. The protracted negotiations involved a number of CAC representatives, but it was the tenacity and commitment of Commissioner Bradley Miles who kept the discussions moving forward.

The commission’s focus and primary driving force was to lease a piece of reasonably-priced land on which it could conduct demonstrations and research for grower education. Of course, depending upon the specific research project, this could mean sacrificing fruit production and potential loss of revenue to the Foundation because Cal Poly sells fruit produced at Pine Tree Ranch at its student store on the Pomona campus. Foundation officials were adamant about the need to continue receiving fruit from the ranch for this purpose. And so with each conversation between the parties, the original terms of the MOU were modified to try and best meet the needs of both parties.

It is important to note that concurrent with the Foundation discussions, CAC management continued to explore additional demonstration grove options, including the pos-

sibility of multiple demonstration grove locations (north and south) and the pros and cons of purchasing versus leasing. However with each option presented, and the negotiations still continuing with the Foundation, the board consensus was to hold off on a decision until negotiations with the Foundation were finalized.

It was March of this year that CAC President Tom Belamore announced that an agreement with the Foundation had been reached, and the board subsequently approved tentative lease terms on 11 acres at the front of the Pine Tree Ranch property. Currently that acreage consists of two acres of Hass avocados and nine acres of lemons. The final agreement presented at this meeting includes a base rent approximately 8 percent under appraised value, a 10-year lease term with options to renew, and a provision declaring CAC's ownership of the fruit produced on the acreage. As part of the agreement, the Foundation called for collaboration with CAC to ensure that research and education activities at the ranch provide for some level of student involvement, a prospect CAC welcomes.

Following board approval at the March meeting, CAC management continued to button up all terms of the Pine Tree Lease agreement, which culminated in the transfer of keys to the property on July 1.

Over the past two months there has been a whirlwind of activity at the ranch. The first item of business was the selection of a farm management company to oversee the day-to-day operations of the newly leased acreage. CAC management immediately set to work to create a request for proposals for these services and sent it to all farm management firms on record with the commission. Upon review of submissions, Progressive Land Management based out of Santa Paula was selected to partner with us on this task.



Jonathan Dixon tours CAC's 2 acres of existing avocado acreage with members of the CAC Board.



Commission management discusses plans for development of new avocado acreage at Pine Tree Ranch.

Next up on our agenda was dealing with the nine acres of lemons. Since CAC is not in the business of growing lemons, it was quickly decided that rather than continue irrigating the trees, it would be best to push and pile the trees and begin prepping that land for future avocado acreage development. While the initial instinct was to burn the piles, it seemed the better route was to chip the trees and use the mulch for the existing avocados and those soon to be planted. Going out to bid for the chipping services, A-1 Tree Service of Nipomo was contacted, and after hearing about the commission's demonstration grove project readily offered up its profits to assist in tackling this task.

At this point the commission's focus has turned to creating a business plan for the demonstration grove, and CAC's Research Project Manager Tim Spann has recently met with an advisory group to discuss potential projects and how the land might best be utilized. The advisory group, consisting of local area growers and farm managers as well as a representative of Cal Poly Pomona, held an initial meeting in mid-September and the formal business plan is currently under development. Based on input from this group, ideas for future land use include grower field days on pruning and irrigation management on the existing avocado acreage, and a variety block, high density planting block and rootstock/scion block are envisioned for the undeveloped nine acres.

In the process of finalizing the demonstration grove plan, CAC will work with the Foundation to identify specific projects in which we can partner with Cal Poly to provide students a site for hands-on experience in the grove. The plan should be finalized in the next few weeks, and following board approval of the 2013-14 budget in October, CAC management will set to work on implementation.

In the meantime, stay tuned to The Greensheet and future issues of *From the Grove* for more details about the demonstration grove including scheduled projects and upcoming grower field days. 🥑