

Springing into Summer!

In my last column I wrote about the excitement of a long, cold winter changing into the lively flush and bloom of spring. By the time you read this, spring will be over and summer will be upon us. For many, the spring flush will be hardening off. Most of our bloom will be finished and we will be watching to see how much of our set will stick. While much of the state seems to be heading into an “off” year, some areas are setting well. May your grove be one of those that will be “on” for next season.

It would be an understatement to say that so far the early summer has been challenging. Where I farm we have had three early heat waves since late April, each followed by a cool period and even a bit of unusually late rain during the first week of May. Our trees must be thinking “what the heck?” Fruit seems to be reacting to the hot/cold/lack of rain by maturing early without normal sizing. Returns for large sizes are great, but there is very little to be found. Early maturity is limiting potential growth and forcing growers to pick more of their crop earlier than planned. Harvesting smaller than expected fruit will have an impact on our crop yields. A shortage of harvesting labor has slowed the pick for many, even as fruit begins to darken in weaker areas.

We are not alone with fruit challenges this year; citrus and berry growers are also having a tough time. The same lack of rain and unseasonable weather has caused some local citrus to stop growing, color and threaten to drop. Berry growers have had such a bad year that some

have turned off their water. All things considered, I would rather be farming avocados this summer than most other California crops.

Scarcity of winter rain is causing other concerns. I attended a meeting this week held by our local fire department heads, sheriffs, CHP, other emergency responders and National Weather Service meteorologists to prepare for the fire season. The meeting was originally scheduled as a pre-fire season preparation. During the past month, we have had three local fires, including the 25,000 acre Spring Fire, so the preparation meeting became a review of the fire season to date and a time to discuss what was done right, what needed correction and how to best prepare for the next six months. This year our fire season started very early and the native vegetation moisture content is as low as it has ever been. Our local agencies are preparing for a very long, dry summer and fall with above average temperatures.

For those of us with exposure to wildfires, it is time to dust off our grove fire prevention and protection plans, talk to local fire officials and do everything we can right now to prepare for what is shaping up to be a very dangerous fire season. Touch up those firebreaks, and mulch or move all prunings, wood and other flammable materials out of the grove. We know from hard experience that old firewood in groves lives up to its name in a fire and increases damage to our trees. I have been encouraged to find that there is a growing understanding among local fire departments that our groves are important assets that need to be protected as



Ed McFadden

carefully as structures.

Check out Ken Melban's report in “Commission Hosts Congresswoman Julia Brownley”. Ken did a great job bringing the Congresswoman to our groves. It is hard for me to describe how valuable it is to bring our elected representatives to our farms to hear our story. During the Congresswoman's time with us we did a grove tour. For those who may not have experience with our crop, it is eye opening to see and experience firsthand harvesting techniques, irrigation systems, hillside plantings and other practices we growers take for granted. Labor issues become easier to understand when you have a picking sack over your shoulder and are trying to do an 8 oz. size pick with a 9-foot picking pole. Picking a dozen fruit for the first time may be difficult but how would you like to pick many thousands in a day? Water issues are more tangible when you are walking through a grove irrigated with an efficient micro-sprinkler system. [Hand Grown in California](#) becomes real and important when you pick fruit from a family-owned California grove just an hour drive from one of the largest west coast markets.

Lots of challenges, but if we weren't optimists, and did not love what we do, we would not be growers of California avocados. 🥑