

Later Start to Season Should Aid California's Marketing Efforts

Though it appears to be general consensus that the marketing of the 2023 California avocado crop will be more challenging than a year ago, handlers also are noting that the later start to this year's season will work in the growers' favor.

"We have started with California but only in a very light way," said Peter Shore, vice president of product management for Calavo Growers, Santa Paula, CA., on March 7. "We expect volume to gradually increase throughout the month but it still should be light until late March or early April."

The later-than-usual start will allow Calavo to have marketable volume until late summer. "April, May, June and into July should be the peak shipping period, but we do expect to push some fruit into September," Shore said.

He added that there has been little reason for most California growers to get started as the higher-than-usual rain totals have made it more difficult to harvest and also gives fruit a sizing boost as it stays on the tree and soaks up the rain. "The weather has been cool in recent weeks so there has been no hurry to get started," he added.

The Calavo executive did not quarrel with the California Avocado

Commission's pre-season estimate of 257 million pounds for the season, but he noted that the company's fieldmen believe that number might be a tad ambitious.

Shore said the stretching of the season from March into September will allow those customers who love California fruit to have it for an extended period of time. It also should help the California avocado be in strong demand throughout its season. "We see good demand for avocado sales in the second quarter, increasing as we move from spring into summer," he said.

He added that each retailer is different as to when they want to start on their California fruit program. "When they start requesting it, we will pick it," he said, adding that the delayed start is helping the fruit size, which helps the grower, as larger fruit is always sold at a premium compared to the smaller sizes. Shore expects a larger profile this year with a greater preponderance of 48s and larger.

He said it is no secret that this year's FOB price is lower than last year because of strong global supplies, which are creating very good opportunities for retail promotions. "There is definitely a good supply of avocados out there and

retailers are promoting the crop very well," he said. "We expect good promotions (for California fruit) leading up to Cinco de Mayo and continuing through Memorial Day and into the summer."

He also mentioned that there will be a relatively good supply of both Lamb Hass and the newer GEM variety of avocados this season. Both varieties have become popular among growers because of their ability to support higher density plantings and produce larger fruit that matures later in the season. "In July we expect to see a pretty steady supply of these varieties," he said.

Gary Clevenger, managing member of Freska Produce International, Oxnard, CA, told *From the Grove* in early March that the packer/handler had not started marketing any California fruit yet. "A lot of growers are waiting to see what's going to happen with the (field) price," he said. "They are taking a 'wait and see' approach so I don't think we will have much fruit until mid or late March. Most growers don't seem to need or want to pick at this point."

A look at the daily pick count bears that out. "So far," Clevenger said on March 7, "I don't think we have picked 1% of the projected volume."

The numbers confirm that, as in

early March of 2022, California was sending about 8 million pounds of fruit to market each week. This year, weekly shipments did not top 1 million pounds during any week through the first week of March.

With the smaller crop, Clevenger expects very little California fruit to be marketed east of Denver as there will be strong demand in California and the other western states. He agreed with Shore that the crop might not reach 257 million pounds. “That sounds high,” he said. “We’ve had a couple of growers that lost quite a bit of fruit in the wind down south (San Diego County.)”

The Freska executive was buoyed by the rising avocado market, which received a nice bump in late February/early March. “Right now, 48s are being quoted at \$32-\$33,” he said, which was about \$10 more per box than mid-February.

Still a price in the low \$30s was only about half what it was a year earlier. “The lower price means there have been a lot of promos and movement has been very good,” he said.

Clevenger said a new wrinkle in the California deal this year will be the additional volume from other varieties, including GEM. He said retailers may be asking for a bit of a discount to buy GEMs simply because it’s new. But he added GEMs grow much larger than the Hass so even if you have to give a little bit of a discount, the size profile will more than make up for it because larger fruit returns more dollars per pound at the farmgate. “We expect the GEMs to peak on 32s, 36s and 40s. It looks like a Hass and is a good eating piece of fruit. And it grows on the interior of the tree, which means its less susceptible to wind and other damage,” he said. “A lot of growers were planting GEMS three or four years ago so we are going to get more fruit this year. It’s going to be a bigger part of the volume. It will be in-

teresting to watch what it does.”

Index Fresh Vice President of Sales Debbie Willmann also commented on the expected trajectory of the California crop. “As this season is starting with much different market conditions than last year, along with unusual weather delays, we anticipate growers will harvest with limited volumes in March, increase weekly volumes in April, and hit peak harvesting in the months of May and June.”

She added that Index Fresh, which is headquartered in Corona, CA, expects to begin transitioning some retail and foodservice business in April with promotable volumes expected to last through July.

Like the other handlers interviewed, Willmann said support for California avocados goes beyond the state’s borders. “There is a loyal customer base for California Grown, or locally grown, that spans the entire West Coast up to Washington, and that includes neighboring states such as Arizona, Nevada and Idaho,” she said.

Keith Blanchard, California field manager for Index Fresh, discussed some other aspects of this season including the size of the fruit and the effects the welcome rain will have on the crop, both this year and next. “The rain has definitely been beneficial for this year,” he said. “It’s long overdue and very much needed.”

He added that the rain could result in an increase in the estimated tonnage of the 2023 crop as it helps the crop size. “The overall tonnage in any year is very dependent on growers’ decisions about when they will pick their fruit,” he said. “Last year, the early market was very good so a lot of fruit was picked early and it wasn’t allowed to size” to its full potential.

This year, the opposite in-grove situation is at hand with growers letting the fruit sit on the tree as the field

price improves. That delay offers the additional advantage of helping the fruit size, which Blanchard said could result in more tonnage. “I always thought that the estimate was a little low,” he said, admitting that “I am an optimist and usually think it’s too low.”

But this year, he believes that optimism might be rewarded as the rainstorms and harvest delay work in tandem to grow the crop. Blanchard expects this year’s Hass crop to peak on 48s and 60s.

He added the beneficial effects of the well-above normal rainfall will also stretch into next season. “The rain appears to be bringing on a very good bloom for 2024,” he said.

As he spoke on Friday, March 10, he predicted that the following week will see a lot more California fruit in the marketplace. The field price was on the rise and more and more growers were indicating a desire to get started in the next week or two.

Blanchard also was optimistic about the opportunities for the GEM variety this year. “The estimate is for 6 million pounds, but I think that could be light,” he said. “There are a lot of GEM groves coming on.”

He said industry talk predicted the GEM volume would take a significant jump this year but the pre-season estimate only predicted a 1-million-pound increase from 2022 to 2023. “We are expecting a two-fold jump at some point,” he said. “If not this year then next year I think we could see 10-12 million pounds of GEMs.”

The Index field manager said it’s a good option for the grower and it also gives the retailer a new piece of fruit to sell. He noted that nursery sales of GEM trees are still very robust pointing to a bright future for the new California variety. 🍷