

## California Growers Producing More Volume than Estimated

In late May, the California Avocado Commission released its mid-season 2024 California avocado crop estimate, which was a significant increase from the preseason estimate of 208 million pounds. The mid-season projection actually includes two estimates, with growers predicting that the year-end volume will top 271 million pounds and handlers setting the crop size at 250 million pounds.

The two numbers represent a 20-30% volume increase. In releasing both mid-season estimates, CAC revealed that it typically releases one number as the two industry segments are usually closely aligned. "However, there are times when the grower and handler survey results are not aligned closely enough for the Commission to publish one number," CAC said in its report.

CAC did note that the grower number was derived from responses representing nearly 43% of California's producing acreage, with the growers reporting that, on average, parts of Ventura County should yield about 10,000 pounds to the acre.

While there is obviously a difference of opinion about how much fruit is still on the trees, there is complete agreement that there is much more fruit than originally expected.

Peter Shore, vice president of pro-

duction for Santa Paula-based Calavo Growers Inc., said the revised estimate is the result of taking a look at the trees throughout the state and realizing that, especially in the northern districts, they have performed better than anticipated. He noted that the pre-season estimate was developed through the observation of growers and handlers last fall while the fruit was still very small. He commented that it is not an exact science but rather an educated guess. The mid-season estimate is clearly based on more recent data with a higher likelihood of being more accurate.

Shore said the trees in the southern districts did have a lighter crop than usual and that observation was influential in the overall pre-season estimate. But as the season has developed, trees in the northern districts are overperforming and have more fruit on each tree than anticipated. He said in late May that the number of harvested pounds throughout the month made it clear the pre-season estimate was too low. Shore said when the state topped the halfway point of the pre-season estimate in May, it was obvious there was much more fruit on the trees yet to be harvested. While the industry had originally expected to peak in May and early June with much less volume after the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, that's not the reality playing out in

the groves.

"We are definitely going to have good volume through July and into late August," Shore said. "In fact, we believe we will have California avocados to sell into September."

He said the strong market price that has accompanied California supplies since the first bins were being picked in late January and early February should remain in place through the end of the season. He reasoned that the market dynamics do not appear as if they will be adversely affected by California's increased volume. Mexico's volume is still declining as it always does in summer and the vast majority of Peru's volume, which is a bit later this year, is presold as part of program buys for the larger retail operations.

"The demand for California fruit remains very strong," Shore said, adding that the almost perfect bell-shaped size curve is filling the needs of everyone on the supply chain. "As we go through the California season, we believe the strong market will follow the crop. We are expecting great July 4 promotions."

Mission Produce Inc. Sales Director Brooke Becker credited the substantial rain in both 2023 and 2024 for adding volume to this year's production. "The reason for the better-than-expected season really comes down to

the rainfall from the last two years and the springtime conditions that led to a plentiful fruit set,” she said.

The Oxnard-based grower-packer-shipper is taking advantage of the extra California volume to service its customers beyond the U.S. border. “This year, Mission Produce plans to use California fruit to fill customer programs across the U.S., Canada, China, Korea and Japan,” Becker noted.

She added that during this time of year the California fruit is expected to be the highest shelf-life option, due to its lower dry matter content compared to other origins. “As a company, we’ve been connected to California avocados for 40 years – it’s where we started,” Becker said. “So, California is always a special addition to our diverse portfolio of avocado origins.”

Specifically talking about California production, Becker revealed that this season Mission Produce launched new packaging for its limited-edition California GEM avocados. The GEMs are being offered in bags of 40s and 48s, and mixed bags of 36s-60s.

Carson McDaniel, vice president of McDaniel Fruit Company, which is headquartered in Fallbrook, agreed that the California crop is overperforming expectations. Speaking to *From the Grove* before CAC released its revised estimate, McDaniel did not want to predict the number but he said it has become apparent that there is more fruit on the trees in the northern districts. “We have a ton of fruit in Ventura County,” he said. “We are seeing more individual pieces on the trees than we expected. San Diego County is running light but Ventura County is going to have more fruit than we thought.”

Urged on by a strong market and a dearth of large fruit, many California avocado growers began harvesting their groves sooner than expected setting themselves and their colleagues up

for what appears to be an excellent per pound return all season long.

During the four full weeks of April, California sent more than 45 million pounds of fruit to market, representing about 22% percent of the pre-season estimate of 208 million pounds. “We got off to a fast start,” said Eco Farms Avocados sales director Gahl Crane on May 1. “The harvest is definitely ahead of schedule. Initially, we (California growers) had a slow start but in the last few weeks – in fact, throughout April – the harvesting pace has surpassed estimates.”

He said market demand fueled the harvesting pace as Mexico’s slowly decreasing supplies were not able to keep up with the buying habits of the consumer. “Retailers are looking for a second source and California growers have responded,” he said, guessing on the first day of May that the month might produce California’s peak volume.

May did prove to be a great month for California growers as they sent more than 50 million pounds to market with a very solid pricing structure. It was the very good April/May volume that led many growers and their handlers to determine that the crop was going to pack out at a much higher level than originally anticipated.

Gahl of Eco Farms did note another anomaly of this year’s California production in the early going, and that is that northern district growers (Ventura County north) were sending more fruit to market than the southern district growers (San Diego and Riverside) early in the season. “Through April, we typically see a 50/50 split in volume between the northern and southern districts; this year, 75% of the volume to date (May 1) is coming from the north with only 25% from the south.”

Gary Clevenger, managing member of Freska Produce International,

Oxnard, CA, agreed the harvesting of California avocados was occurring at a faster clip than anticipated. He noted in late April that almost 30% of the expected volume had been shipped. He commented that the marketing situation has been strong but it could even get stronger in May if Mexico’s volume starts to decline as it usually does in May and June.

Clevenger said the strong market is a great incentive for California growers to harvest their fruit on the early side and so is the fruit that is already on the trees for the 2025 season. “We’ve had an amazing bloom and the trees are loaded,” he said. “Some growers are going to want to get this year’s crop off the trees to allow next year’s crop to grow.”

He added that it was far too early to put numbers on the size of the 2025 crop, but initial indicators are for a significant increase with this winter’s rain already doing its work for next year.

Shore also commented on the 2025 crop year that is currently sitting on the trees, especially in the more southern districts. “Of course, we don’t know what’s going to happen until we get through the year, but what we are seeing is very favorable. We had a heavy bloom and heavy rain, which is very good for the tree and the fruit set.”

Heading into June, he noted that next year’s crop has negotiated many of the potentially negative environmental impacts that could hurt production but there are still some hurdles out there. “We know we will get some wind in the fall and we could also get extreme heat in the summer like we did in 2018 when we had many days over 110 degrees.”

But Shore said temperatures that high are very rare and he is not expecting them to occur in the summer of 2024. He went into the summer with the expectation that the 2025 crop will pack out at a relatively high number. 🍌