

By Tim Linden

## A Year Like NO Other

**J**an DeLyser, vice president of marketing for the California Avocado Commission (CAC), likes to say that no two California avocado years are ever the same. She has been closely aligned with the industry for two decades and stands by that comment. Every year is different than the one before it and the one after it. However, over time, there are years that look alike.

But 2018 broke the mold...any mold. "It is clearly unlike any year we have ever seen," she said. "Everyone is saying that."

About a year ago – early fall 2017 – growers were impressed with the fruit on the tree. No one was predicting a record year but they were expecting a solid bounce-back from the 2017 season when only 216 million pounds of California avocados were harvested and sent to market. There were whispers of a crop north of 400 million pounds.

Fall weather, including wind, and a pair of devastating fires in December tempered the enthusiasm for a big, big crop and led industry officials to re-estimate that 375 million pounds of California avocados would make their way to market in 2018.

As the season wore on it appeared that the estimate of 375 million pounds might be a bit high but at least in the ballpark. Then a devastating heat wave hit California in early July. Unseen and unheard of temperatures approaching 118 degrees were registered in some



Southern California avocado groves. High temperatures everywhere exacted a toll. Much fruit still on trees dropped or suffered heat damage, making it unsaleable, and many trees also experienced damage from the extreme temperatures. Some observers predicted volume would never reach 300 million pounds and only limited production would make it past mid-August.

A solid August has instead pushed the crop past 300 million pounds and helped those growers with fruit to register good returns for the season. Though an average crop in historical terms, it is a solid rebound from 2017 and a year that did produce above average farm gate prices.

"The returns have been good," said Gary Caloroso, director of market-

# Aha



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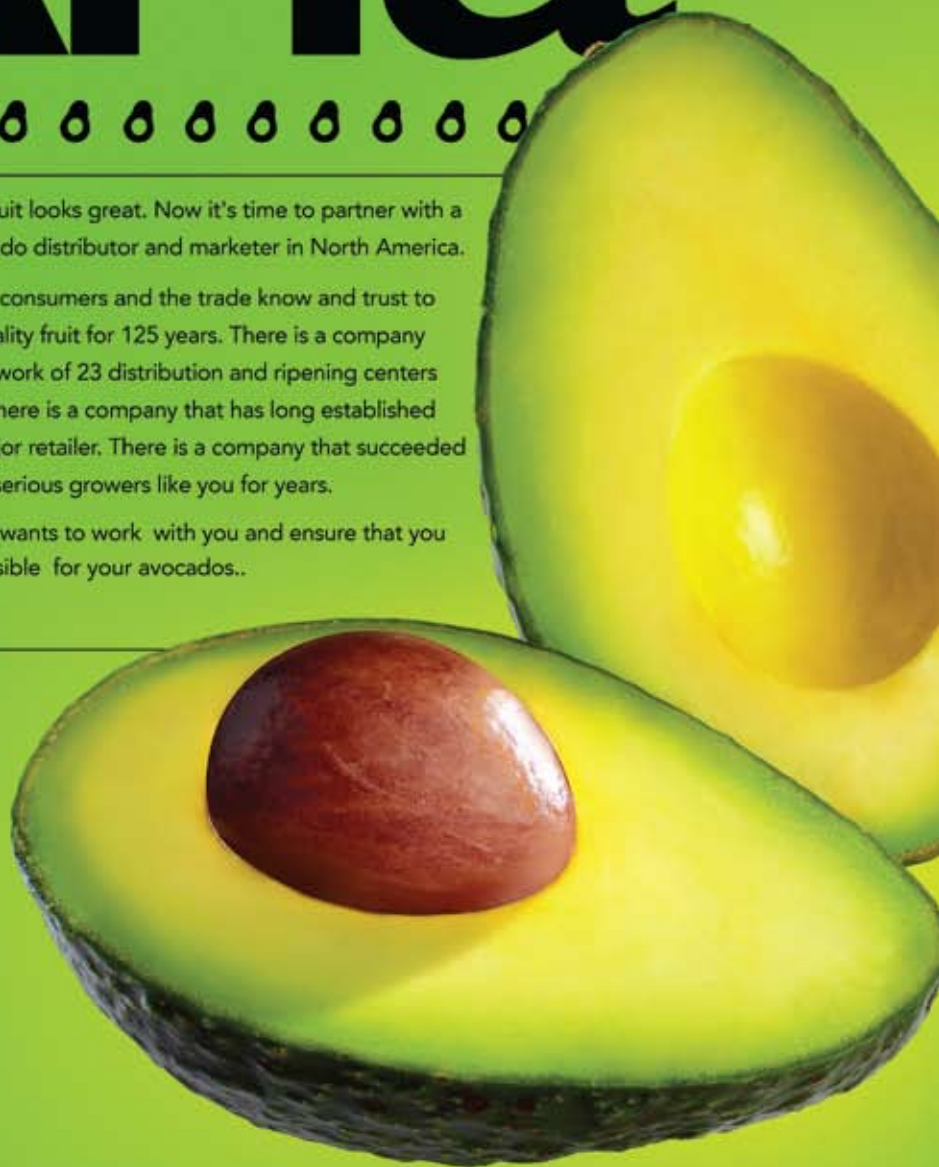
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ing for Giumarra. But he quickly added that there were pockets of growers that were devastated in 2018 because of the many calamities. “Our hearts go out to these growers,” he said. “Some experienced devastating losses. We’re feeling very badly for those growers.”

In fact, the losses are still being calculated. Caloroso said in early September that it is still very difficult for some growers to assess the damage to their trees caused by the heat. “When we get into the fall – two to three months down the road, we will have a much better handle on it.”

For preliminary budgeting purposes, CAC has asked handlers to estimate the 2019 crop. As always, it is necessary for the Commission to start to budget well before the first piece of fruit is picked. April Aymami, CAC’s industry affairs director, said that the Commission had just recently completed the very preliminary handler crop surveys and field meetings to discuss the 2019 industry estimates. As expected, estimates represented a wide range of responses, with no one fully confident in their numbers, perhaps cautioned by the experiences of the past 12 months.

“It’s just too early to tell,” said Caloroso repeatedly, in response to several questions from this reporter on the subject.

Rob Wedin, vice president of fresh sales and marketing for Calavo Growers, was equally hesitant to reveal his firm’s response to CAC’s pre-season estimate request. He said it is very difficult to create an accurate estimate at this point in time (early September) because of the unknown damage to trees from the December fires as well as the July heat wave. While the damage to some groves from these weather events is evident and can be calculated, there are many other trees where the effect won’t be known until the 2019 crop is actually harvested. What is the ultimate

reduction of pounds on these trees exposed to extreme heat either by fire or the strange July weather? No one knows and that is a very important factor in determining what the ultimate tonnage will be for 2019.

DeLyser said crop forecasting also has become more challenging because of different tree densities. Yield from an acre of traditional planting could be significantly different than an acre with twice as many trees. No longer can you just average yield and multiply it by the number of acres. She did say that CAC is working with experts to refine its crop estimating tools in an effort to come up with a more accurate number.

Wedin said growers are reporting vastly varied pictures of their own groves, which makes estimating even more challenging. “Growers in inland valleys where the early July temperatures reached 118 degrees have reported significant damage,” Wedin said. “On the coast, there was far less impact.”

Another handler, Gary Clevenger chief operating officer at Freska Produce International, gave a very vague answer that everyone repeated in their conversations. “It (the 2019 crop size) will be less than this year.”

He said Freska is a relatively small player and doesn’t have the volume to allow it to make an accurate estimate about the industry at large. While saying it will be smaller than 2018 is vague, it is an important distinction as it clearly points to a short crop year.

DeLyser said every year CAC creates a unique marketing plan to fit that year’s crop. “Our role is to get the best information we can from the handlers about the size and timing of the crop and relay that to retailers so we can market and promote that crop in the best way possible.”

For 2019, she said it appears that the bulk of the volume will be marketed

in the April through July time frame.

Wedin concurred, noting that during the past two years the April through July time frame has been a very good one for California growers with strong markets and strong demand. He expects that many growers will ramp up their production in mid-April to participate in the always-strong Cinco de Mayo promotional period.

He said a short crop has its own peculiarities including a more varied size profile as there is very little size picking. He reasoned that many groves will not have enough fruit to justify two harvesting passes.

Wedin said production from other points of origin will play an important role as growers determine when to enter the market with their fruit. For the past two years, Mexico’s late spring/early summer volume has waned while Peru’s summer volume shipped to the United States has increased. This year Peru’s volume skewed later which created a different set of marketing dynamics.

And another potential factor on the horizon is the approval of fruit from the state of Jalisco, Mexico, to be shipped into the United States. For the past two years, the approval process has been delayed as the United States and Mexico were working through trade issues. Recently, the United States government announced that those talks are coming to a conclusion. Approval of Jalisco fruit, which matures during the summer, could be a byproduct of that effort.

Caloroso said another very important factor is when the retail community wants California fruit. “We have a core of Western retailers who prefer California avocados and want to switch to California as soon as they can,” he said. “Our strategy will be the same as always, which is to take care of those core customers as soon as we can.” 🥑