

Grower Profile



Freak Snowstorm Hits Temecula

By Tim Linden

In the 40-plus years that Ben Drake of Drake Enterprises Inc. in Temecula has been growing avocados and other crops, a light snow dusting has been a rare sight. Consequently, he and son-in-law J.D. Harkey were more than shocked when a foot of snow landed on their trees in the higher elevations of the De Luz area and surrounding region of San Diego and Riverside counties in late December.

"It's the worst cold weather we've ever had," said Harkey. "And we've never seen a snowfall like that. We had 12 inches of snow in some places. Branches were loaded."

Ben Drake is the fifth generation of his family to grow crops in this particular corridor of Riverside and San Diego counties. After graduating from Fresno State University, Drake headed back to Riverside County where he worked for the County Agricultural Commissioner's office. Eventually, he got a job with an agricultural development company that was putting in avocados. That led to the purchase of his own land and the development of his own groves.

Today Drake Enterprises owns or manages 400 acres of avocados as well as some wine grapes and citrus groves.

J.D. Harkey, Drake's son-in-law, is the director of operations and currently runs the business on a day-to-day basis. He grew up in an avocado family in Fallbrook as both his parents and his grandparents had avocado trees on their land.



Dr. Andy Walker from University of California, Davis and Ben Drake

J.D. is well acquainted with the area, which led to his absolute shock in late December when the snow started to fall and didn't stop. Nor did it melt. "We had so much snow



on the trees, it was unbelievable. It did significant damage to a number of trees."

In the first place, the accumulation of snow snapped many limbs and branches. The cold and snow also damaged a significant amount of fruit. Harkey and his crews tried to salvage what they could, but he said it was very slim pickings. Very little of the fruit could be saved. Over the next several weeks, some fruit on the trees turned brown or bronze indicating that it was also unmarketable.

Harkey estimated that Drake Enterprises lost about 15-20 percent of its 2015 crop. "In some groves we lost 80-90 percent and in others we lost nothing."

They didn't go down without a fight, though. "We ran water for about four days," he said.

When the temperatures dipped below freezing, running water throughout the grove is one strategy available to try to increase the temperature of the grove and save the fruit. Harkey believes this action did save some fruit but it couldn't save everything. He noted that as serious as the snow was, the cold temperatures actually did more damage to the fruit itself. Seemingly for hours on end, the coldest spots were sitting at 28-29°F, which is cold enough to damage the fruit and even the trees themselves.

The De Luz area near Temecula was hardest hit in the higher elevations. "There wasn't much damage in Fallbrook. The storm blew in from the East. First there was rain, then sleet, then snow. All the way up the hill you could see the snow getting deeper and deeper."

Because of inconsistent weather patterns, Harkey said some growers received significant damage, while many others no doubt feel fortunate that they dodged a bullet. "You could stand up on top of the hill and see the snow pattern. Some places got a foot – mostly closer to town – and other places didn't get much snow at all."

Talking to *From the Grove* in late February, Harkey said the damage had been assessed and he doesn't expect to

encounter any surprises as he picks this year's crop. "We can see the fruit that is damaged. We know we lost a significant percentage but the fruit that is still on the trees will be fine."

He added that another drawback from the storm was the excess water that had to be used to try to warm the groves. "That will just make it more difficult this year" with regard to costs.

If there is a silver lining, it would be that the fruit that fell off the trees will help next year's set. But in late February, Harkey said it was too early to judge that. The trees were just beginning to bud with 80 degree February weather. That is a bit early for Harkey, and he would like to see more rain and less sun, but anything is better than looking out and seeing a foot of snow in your grove. 🍌



J.D. Harkey