

# Grower Profile



## Jeff Dillman, North San Diego County

### Fallbrook via Utah

By Tim Linden

For more than two years now, Jeff and Kim Dillman have been commuting from their old home in Utah to their new one in Fallbrook. With their youngest daughter, Breann, heading into her final high school semester, the Dillmans are poised to officially sever the Utah connection and completely move into their North San Diego County home, complete with 290 avocado trees, 95 percent of them of the Hass variety.

"I grew up in Downey, CA, but my family moved to Utah when I was 15 or 16 years old," said Jeff.

He has spent several decades there as he finished his schooling, got married and raised a family. A few years ago with some of the five kids moved out and the specter of the empty nest nearing reality, Pam Dillman indicated a desire to move to Southern California. The Dillmans began looking and it wasn't that long before they found a place to their liking that included 2.5 acres of avocados. Though the Dillmans had never been involved in agriculture in any meaningful way, the inclusion of the avocado grove wasn't just by happenstance. "Once we started looking it became obvious that there were a lot of avocado groves in the area (with houses attached) and so that's what we started looking for," he said.

"We bought in November of 2011," Jeff said. "At first, we rented out the house and hired a grove manager."

And thus began the Dillman's crash course in avocado growing 101.

Soon thereafter, the Dillmans established that they would



*Jeff Dillman*

complete the move to California in June of 2014 after their youngest daughter graduates from high school. In the meantime, the couple made many trips to the Golden State to tend the grove. "We decided to do the pruning ourselves," Jeff reported.

He explained that the grove was overgrown so he has been "stumping" the trees little by little over the past couple of years and expects to complete the job over the next several years. "Some of the trees are over 50 feet tall and it is impossible to pick all the fruit."



He and his wife are cutting them back to about five feet. The first trees he cut in 2012 are starting to come back and may yield a little bit of fruit this year. "It takes two to three years to produce fruit again is what I've been told," he said. "But we need to get the grove to be manageable. We've done a lot of cleanup and the trees are much healthier."

Jeff, in fact, has been able to spend more time in the grove this past winter because he has now moved to the Fallbrook home on a fulltime basis. In Utah, he was a manager at a Costco and in the past year put in for a transfer to the Costco in nearby Lake Elsinore when a similar position opened up. "I got the transfer sooner than I expected to so I moved out here," he said, leaving his wife and daughter in Utah to finish out the school year.

Working 50 hour weeks at Costco and spending the rest of his spare time in the grove is keeping him a very busy man. "I don't have much time for anything else, but I am very intrigued by it."

He added that he loves working outdoors and back home in Utah, he spent a lot of time gardening so working the soil is something he enjoys. "I've learned a lot mostly from my grove manager."

Ultimately, Jeff and Kim want their 290 trees to turn a profit but for the time being, he understands he is going to take his lumps as he gets the grove manageable. "The first year (2012) we had a yield of about 25,000 pounds and we broke even. Last year (after stumping a significant portion of the grove) we got about 10,000 pounds and we lost about \$10,000."

As would be expected, Dillman's biggest expense is water.

He said the cost has been close to \$900 per month during the dry months, which is what he has mostly encountered this past year. Stumping more trees this winter, however, does have some advantage with regard to water use. "My grove manager tells me that with a stumped tree you can reduce the water by about 70 percent so that should result in some savings."

Talking to *From the Grove* in early February, Jeff said his on-tree crop was sizing fairly well and he was estimating picking about 20,000 pounds this year. The last two years, he has not size picked but rather stripped the grove in April. This year, he is still anticipating a late April harvest in an effort to capitalize on the Cinco de Mayo pull, but if the fruit is not large enough, he will probably wait a month. "I haven't figured out the picking thing yet. The last two years we have just gone with the grove manager's crew."

With an ultimate goal of managing his own grove completely, Dillman said he will have to learn the harvesting part as well as other aspects of growing avocados. But he's ready to learn.

"I went to a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) meeting put on by the California Avocado Commission (CAC) recently and learned a lot." He added that other growers as well as the CAC staff were very helpful directing him to websites where he could get more information.

In one respect, Dillman is a fast learner. "Like the other growers I've met I am frustrated with the water situation and the price we have to pay for it."

He also has high expectations for his trees. "I expect to see 40,000 pounds per year when we get the grove where we want it. If we get that every year, we will make a profit." 🥑

