



Photo credit: Laurel Braitman

Avocado growers Dan and Susan Pinkerton, with their children Catherine and Doug, count their blessings amidst the ashes of their home.

The Beast That Would Not Die

By Ken Melban
Vice President of Industry Affairs

On the morning of December 4, 2017, with Santa Ana winds forecast to begin later that day and throughout the week, California avocado growers knew they would be facing some challenges. What no one realized, however, was the unimaginable fire headed their way. The fire started on December 4, 2017, just after 6 p.m. near the Thomas Aquinas College just north of Santa Paula, in Ventura County, and quickly became known as the Thomas Fire. By December 18, 2017, the fire had burned out of control for 15 days. More

than 1,000 homes and other structures were destroyed in its path, and more than 272,000 acres had burned.

It had moved into Santa Barbara County and was threatening communities there, while it continued burning through the Los Padres National Forest. This fire truly was “The Beast That Would Not Die.” Unfortunately, many avocado groves were burned too, and tragically some farmers lost their homes. Then, on December 14, 2017, as over 8,000 fire personnel battled this apocalyptic fire, the unimaginable occurred. Cory Iverson, a Cal Fire engineer from San Diego County, lost his



Jason Cole begins the rebuilding process.



Josh Pinkerton assesses fire damage in his grove.

life while fighting the fire near an avocado grove north of Fillmore. The heroic Iverson is survived by his wife, two-year old daughter and unborn baby. Cal Fire has set up a benevolent fund for the family (<http://12881sd.org/index.cfm?section=1>). By December 22, 2017, the Thomas Fire had become the largest fire in California history and was only 65 percent contained.

While the Thomas Fire raged in the north, to the south, in San Diego County, the Lilac Fire broke out on December 7, 2017. Also fanned by Santa Ana winds, the fire burned through 4,100 acres, including some avocado groves and more than 150 structures. Fortunately, fire crews were able to get the upper hand and by December 15, 2017, the fire was fully contained.

The California Avocado Commission (CAC) has remained in daily contact with growers and industry members to try and assess the extent of grove damage. Based on GIS grove location imagery, CAC was able to identify approximately 4,900 acres in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties within the Thomas Fire's perimeter. In addition, another 130 avocado acres were within the Lilac Fire's perimeter.

CAC immediately began to coordinate with the United States Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency (FSA) to ensure impacted growers could apply for federal emergency relief programs. Potential FSA disaster assistance programs for affected growers are as follows:

The Tree Assistance Program provides financial assistance to qualifying orchardists to help them replant or rehabilitate trees damaged by natural disasters (separate from crop insurance).

The Emergency Conservation Program offers funding and technical assistance to growers to help them rehabilitate land damaged by natural disasters. This program may provide cost share assistance for debris removal, land leveling and shaping,



Firemen protect an avocado grove.



Congresswoman Julia Brownley tours Rancho Simpatica to see first-hand the fire damage with Jamie Johnson, Ed McFadden, and Ken Melban (CAC).



(L-R) CA state senator Hannah-Beth Jackson, Ken Melban (CAC), Catherine Pinkerton Keeling, Susan Pinkerton, and Congresswoman Julia Brownley discuss the devastation caused by the Thomas Fire.



Catherine Pinkerton Keeling (L) and her mother Susan Pinkerton (C) discuss federal government assistance programs with Congresswoman Julia Brownley.

irrigation replacement, and cattle fencing.

Emergency loans are available to producers located in counties that receive a primary or contiguous disaster designation.

An FSA Disaster Assistance Programs fact sheet is available online at this address: https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdafiles/FactSheets/2017/fsa_disaster_assistance_programs_at_a_glance_oct2017.pdf

CAC staff have conducted field visits to burned groves, and while there is significant damage to quite a few groves, in many instances it's too early to determine the severity. When a grove is burned, the fire may not travel through the entire grove and/or trees may have an opportunity for rehabilitation. Many of the groves suffered damage on their perimeter, but the fire did not progress through the entire grove. Some very young groves appear to be unscathed. The leaf litter in groves provided a tremendous source of fuel for the fire, but damage to trees has varied by grove and even within a grove. It will take weeks if not months to fully ascertain the fire damage to the California avocado industry.

Story after story has emerged of amazing avocado growers and their heroic efforts as they fought to save their groves and their neighbor's grove. Many prevailed, yet others were not so fortunate. Ultimately, as Santa Ana winds reached hurricane level strength, in some instances the Thomas Fire would not be stopped. The forces of nature were just too strong.

Remarkably, as growers faced unfathomable losses, another set of stories began to emerge. Stories of California avocado farmers' determination and resilience. These growers, who've lost their livelihood and their homes, have risen above the ashes and maintained the most amazing optimistic spirit. Grower after grower has indicated they are going to rebuild. Dan Pinkerton, a Santa Paula grower who lost his home and part of his grove, said it best, "That which is important is secure!"

As growers begin the process of rebuilding, there will be a



An avocado grove caught in the fire's path.



These avocado trees illustrate the sporadic damage in some instances as the fire moved through groves.



This grove like many was hit with a double whammy – the Thomas Fire fueled by ferocious Santa Ana winds that also caused windfall fruit.



Although this avocado grove and tractor burned, somehow the weather station was spared.



Flames from the Thomas Fire illuminate an avocado grove.

shortage of trees needed for replanting. Typically, in the avocado industry there is a year or so lead time in getting new trees. With the Thomas Fire that lead time will undoubtedly be extended. If you have trees on order, and can delay your planting, please consider helping your neighbor in need by making those trees available to them.

CAC will continue to work with FSA on federal relief assistance for farmers, and explore any other avenues for help. Over the next few weeks CAC will gather information on the overall impact of the fires and provide industry updates when information becomes available. If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact the CAC office at 949-341-1955. 🍏

If you were impacted by the wildfires, notify FSA and your county agricultural commissioner's office at the contacts below:

**USDA-Farm Service Agency
Santa Barbara/Ventura County**

Daisy Banda
Key Program Technician
Daisy.Banda@ca.usda.gov
805.928.9269 ext. 2

Riverside/San Diego Counties

Desiree Garza
County Executive Director
desiree.garza@ca.usda.gov
760.347.3675 ext. 107

Ventura County

Korinne Bell, Chief Deputy Agricultural Commissioner,
Korinne.Bell@ventura.org
Henry Gonzalez, Agricultural Commissioner,
Henry.Gonzales@ventura.org
805.388.4343 ext. 2

Santa Barbara County

Debbie Trupe, Deputy Agricultural Commissioner,
dtrupe@agcommissioner.com
Stephanie Stark, Deputy Agricultural Commissioner,
sstark@agcommissioner.com
805.681.5600

San Diego County

Vince Acosta, Information Technology Principal,
vince.acosta@sdcounty.ca.gov
858.967.8623