

Taking Stock

There are plenty of complaints in farming. Over-regulation, pests, diseases, weather, rising input costs, labor shortages, and a host of other problems are the bane of farmers worldwide regardless of what or where they are growing. For avocados, the commonalities with other commodities end there. The distinctions between crops has been brought into sharp relief by COVID-19, though the pandemic has touched us all. Troubled as these times are, those in the California avocado industry might do well to take stock and reflect on how fortunate we are compared to others.

The 2020 season got off to a strong start with February shipments well ahead of those of prior years and pricing that pulled fruit off the trees. With a projected 370 million-pound crop to move, growers seemed happy to get started early and this proved fortuitous, because a month later the coronavirus was wreaking havoc on the food sector. Demand surges at retail and the loss of a major portion of the foodservice business left suppliers on uncertain footing in a highly unstable market. Add some rainy weeks in March and April, and the avocado market and the inventories it required were anyone's guess.

The California avocado industry was remarkably quick in reacting to the problems posed by the spread of the coronavirus. Handlers swiftly deployed practices aimed at protecting their packinghouse workers, field labor contractors underscored the importance of safety measures while picking, and the California Avocado Commission (CAC) joined with Western Growers

and other organizations to ensure consideration for specialty crops in emergency U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food purchase programs and H-2A workforce availability as border controls were tightening. CAC also developed a COVID-related webpage on its grower website to bring resources together regarding small business assistance, guidance from state and federal authorities, and farm safety measures. CAC's marketing programs underwent a complete reevaluation to correct for major behavioral shifts created by stay-at-home orders across the country.

By late April, the harvest of California avocados had rebounded substantially with shipments exceeding 15 million pounds per week, an indication of increasing retail demand. Although losses on the foodservice side continued to plague the industry, strong consumer pull gave rise to cautious optimism about the weeks ahead. The guarded enthusiasm was buoyed by an April 26 news article by Bloomberg, which seemed to acknowledge the silent hopes of California avocado growers.

Bloomberg observed that "the pandemic has totally transformed the way the world eats. There is no trend, exactly, other than this: People want comfort. They also want to eat their way to stronger immune systems...eating healthier than they would have at restaurants. Avocados are in." The article noted that avocados are one of the food items experiencing a "surprising" price surge over the last several weeks. "It turns out avocado toast and guacamole are proving to be stay-at-home favorites," according to Bloomberg.



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Even though all is not well, and nowhere near normal, you don't have to look far — within agriculture or elsewhere in the business sector — to find examples of industries suffering serious setbacks due to the coronavirus. We've all read the stories about potatoes being plowed under, milk being dumped, restaurants filing bankruptcy, and airlines struggling to stay aloft. Emotion swells and we're deeply empathetic of those in turmoil. And, in turn, we cannot help but feel gratitude to some degree. Gratitude for the role we play in producing and marketing a product with healthful and nutritional qualities that consumers take comfort in. Gratitude for the fact that avocados have something rare that has come to our aid more than once, to get us through some tough times — the fact that they can be "stored" on the tree until things get better, be that market conditions or a waning pandemic.

The list of farming complaints has not gone away, instead it has been made worse by the addition of COVID-19. Growers being growers, I don't expect to get too much more than a moment's reflection about how avocados have fared better than other products, other industries. It's okay, I feel fortunate, and I know my staff does, and that's enough for me. Together, we'll feel glad for you, and we'll continue to try our best to help you weather whatever comes along next. 🍌