

By Tim Linden

Difficult Season Had Ups and Downs

Although when a grower harvests his California avocado crop is always a key factor, it's possible that it has never been as crucial as it was for this 2023 season.

"Timing was the key to this season," said Gery Clevinger, managing member, Freska Produce International, Oxnard, CA. "We finally hit a good market in June and July that lasted through the end of the season. Unfortunately, many growers hit the market when it wasn't so good in the spring."

He added that forecasting volume from the many different sources of supply is a very difficult proposition and he said it is that information that California growers need to make their harvest decisions. "It seems like we are not getting an accurate picture until the fruit is at the (Mexican/U.S.) border and by then it's too late."

It's no secret that the FOB price for avocados was below \$20 for the smaller sizes for most of the first half of the calendar year. Most growers delayed picking as long as they could, but each grower faces their own pressure to get their fruit off the trees, including the notion that they don't want to compromise next year's crop by stressing the trees. So, while there were far fewer pounds harvested in the first four months of the year than in 2022, growers still harvested more than 50% of their total supplies before the market began to strengthen in mid-June. And even then, the improved market was mostly limited to larger fruit.

Peter Shore, vice president of product management for Calavo Grow-

ers, Santa Paula, CA, agreed that it was an entirely different season depending upon when a grower went to market with their fruit. "Prices were uncharacteristically low through the winter and spring, and didn't hit a favorable position until mid to late June with more than half the crop already harvested."

He did say that when California hit its peak in July the market was strong and growers lucky enough to hit that market did pretty well.

But Shore said the volume for 2024 appears to be down again. He noted that in 2022, California growers marketed 275 million pounds and this year's total will finalize at about 233 million pounds. "For next year, some people are predicting a crop below 200 million," he said. "Calavo does not think it's going to be that low but it will almost certainly be lower than this year."

With a volume near the 200-million-pound mark, Shore said the crop will not be marketed broadly. "This year about 90% of the volume was sold in California, Oregon, Washington and Arizona and next year, it is shaping up to be the same."

Another handler representative who asked not to be identified took a more optimistic view of the 2024 crop. "It does appear there is going to be a small crop next year but scarcity can be



a good thing if you market it correctly," he said.

This veteran avocado industry player said the small crop could produce high returns and growers with fruit could end up having a good season. However, he also lamented that 2023 was a difficult year for growers who had to pick early and they may have trouble surviving another down year if their trees are among the many with below average volume.

Clevinger of Freska has heard the talk of a smaller crop but he was hesitant to agree with that forecast. "I've talked to a number of growers that say they have a good crop on their trees," he said. "For them it could be an alternate bearing year with an increase in volume."

He noted in mid-September that the preliminary crop estimate survey was in the process of being filled out and so a better estimate would soon be available. 🍷