

Grower Profile



SUMMER JOB

Leads to Ag Career

By Tim Linden

It was a summer job as a teenager planting citrus and avocados trees that brought Mike Mobley into the agricultural community. Forty years later he is still doing some of the same work...albeit from a different perch.

Mobley grew up in Ventura and still lives there today. His father was a commercial banker and though he always had ag clients, he wasn't involved in the county's top business in any direct way. "I got into the ag business because Paul Leavens offered me a job when I was 15 planting citrus and avocado trees in Moorpark. I did that for seven summers."

Along the way, Mobley took some ag classes at Ventura College and decided he wanted to make a career of it. He transferred to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and in 1979 graduated with an ag management degree. Combining his college degree and his love for agriculture with the family business, Mobley began his post-college career in ag financing working for the Ventura Production Credit Association.

"I did that for a couple of years but I wasn't getting enough dirt under my fingernails," Mobley said.

So he traded in the desk job for a ranch management position with Alan Pinkerton's operation. Alan is the son of the founder of the Pinkerton avocado. Mobley worked for that company for seven years before starting his own ranch management firm.

Today, he is president of Progressive Land Management Inc., which manages about 750 acres mostly of citrus and avocados in the Ventura County area, including his own 66 acre ranch called Rancho La Paz. "I have 33 acres of avocados, which are almost all Hass," he said. "I still see a great future for avocados and we are continuing to increase our acreage."

However, he admits that finding good land with cheap water is almost impossible. There is a lot of competition for the good land from other growers with berries being a big competitor at this point. Mobley said most of the land



made available for avocados that has viable water costs are steeper hillsides, which present their own issues. Moving forward, he expects some of the citrus acreage in Ventura County to be taken out and replaced by avocados over the next handful of years. He said older Valencia orange and lemon groves are being replaced as growers look for higher value crops. "Avocados are definitely a higher value crop that can compete for that land."

One cultural practice that Mobley swears by is inoculating the trees before planting with a "dry water" polymer that gives them a head start in their very early stages. "They take off much faster, use less water and tend to grow very fast," he said.

This doesn't necessarily produce a crop earlier, but he said it produces healthier, larger trees which in the long run do produce more volume.

Mobley also has become a big believer in organic avocado production from a business viewpoint, especially this year. The to-the-grower price differential between conventional avocados and organic ones has been tremendous this



year. Speaking in early August, he said packing sheds were paying above \$1.90 per pound on the spot market for the larger-sized organic avocados that day compared to about \$1.20 for the same size of conventionally-grown fruit. "And this year, most people have a decent crop. I have one organic orchard where we are getting more than 24,000 pounds to the acre."

He is very bullish on organic avocados stating that the demand is still increasing faster than the supply.

As the summer wears on, he said growers of avocados are doing pretty well as long as they have good sized fruit. He cautioned that every year the same math won't pencil out. Next year, in fact, he said the on-tree crop for many of his organic orchards, as well as the conventional ones, is way down. "We are going to be way off next year. I have some groves that only have 25-30 percent of what they had this year."

Mobley said the alternate bearing nature of some avocado trees is partly to blame, but weather conditions have also played a big role. "We had cooler temperatures earlier in the year and so the fruit wasn't sizing. Usually you want to get a quarter or a third of your crop picked before bloom to lighten up the load and minimize the alternate bearing tendency. We weren't able to do that this year."

Continuing on the economic issues, Mobley said the price differential this year has been so great between the small sizes and the large sizes that it has altered picking patterns. On this day, he said the 48s and larger were returning three times as much to growers as the 84s.

While Mobley has grown the Hass variety almost exclusively in his career, he does see utility in expanding the season by growing other varieties. "We are starting to look at other varieties...mostly Lambs and Gems. It could be a way to expand the harvest and that would be advantageous."

Moving forward, Mobley is bullish about the California avocado industry but he said there are challenges to over-

come and cited water and labor as the two most obvious. With some people paying as much as \$1300 for an acre-foot of water, he said that's "way beyond what you can afford for avocados."

For most of the groves he manages, the water systems have been switched to low volume sprinklers in most instances. Practicing all the water conservation techniques he knows, Mobley said it usually takes 2.25 to 2.5 acre-feet of water per acre to produce avocados. This year was a dry year, so much of the acres he manages needed 2.75 acre-feet per acre. Good yields and pretty good returns will help that pencil out this year but when water needs approach 3.0 acre-feet, he said it is difficult to make any money unless you have very cheap water. He added that avocados are "water-loving trees" and he is convinced if water was no concern, yields would be off the charts.

Labor is another problem that seems to be getting worse. He said labor has been tight all year and he rarely can get a full crew. That means it takes longer to harvest a grove, adding that there are some groves that may not get picked this year. "Many crews used to have 25-30 people in them. Now you are lucky to get 10-15 guys. Obviously that takes you twice as long to pick a grove and you fall further and further behind. I know one large block that totally missed the pick."

Nonetheless, Mobley is very happy about the career he picked. He works hard and likes to play hard when he gets the time, which includes surfing and bicycling. He's 57 years old but still enjoys surfing. "I have been surfing since I was 10 years old. I still surf a couple of times a month," he said. "I have salt water in my blood."

He and his wife of 31 years, MaryAnne, have a 20 year old son, Tyler, who attends the University of Hawaii at Hilo. "He's a surfer like me but he has not expressed any interest in following me into agriculture...but you never know." 🥑