

Grower Profile



Ralph Foster Sees Industry from Unique Perch

By Tim Linden

Fallbrook has been home to Ralph Foster for most of his 73 years...and he has spent virtually all the time involved with avocados.

He has planted trees and picked fruit. He has been a packer and a salesman. He has sold avocados from the back of his truck on the Los Angeles market and from his own packing shed. He has worked with both conventional and organic fruit. And he has bought and developed several groves as well as selling scores more as a successful realtor.

Foster knows the avocado industry from many angles.

"I was born in San Diego but by the time I was five we were living in Fallbrook and my dad was in the avocado business," he said.

In fact, his father had learned about avocados from Ralph's grandfather who had a dozen acres or more of avocados in the El Cajon area in the 1920s and '30s. Ralph's father initially was attracted to the dairy industry but it was in 1945 that he moved to Fallbrook and bought a grove.

"When I was young I'd work in the grove and by the early 1950s I was driving up to the L.A. Market and selling the fruit to wholesalers on both the Seventh Street and Ninth Street markets. His list of buyers reads like a who's who of the mid-1950s L.A. produce industry: "Eagle Produce, Hall, Hass & Vessey, Perricone Citrus...all the big guys."

The Fosters sold through several different packers but eventually started the Foster Avocado Company. Ralph bought out his father in the '60s and continued the company well into the 1970s. "We were one of the first companies to use bins," he said. "I used a 3 (foot) by 4 (foot) bin because you could fit it in the back of a pickup truck," he said.

Though he kept his grove, in the mid-1970s Foster sold the

packing shed to another company and got into the real estate business. Today he specializes in agricultural land, especially avocado groves. But he is still a grower with a 12-year-old grove of 25 acres that is a certified organic grove.

"I typically sell to two or three different packers each year," he said.

He called this year a breakeven season as he averaged 10,000 pounds per acre at an average

return of \$1.57 per pound. "My costs are a lot higher (than a conventional grower)," he said. "There are only a couple of materials (crop protection tools) that I can use on my groves. Every time the helicopter flies over for a half-hour of work that costs me \$1,000."

Foster said his materials costs for those acres average about \$2,000 per acre. He has both well and district water with district water making up about 70 percent of the total on an average year. The amount of rain that comes has a great impact on that number and this past year he said he was never able to turn off the district water spigot.

He considers himself an innovator and an experimenter. "I am trying new things including experimenting with high density planting and different pruning techniques to get more pounds per acre. There is a tremendous amount of research out there to help us improve per acre production.



Ralph Foster



We also need a way to get rid of the cycling tendencies of the trees.”

In some cases, he said that involves unburdening the trees of a big crop one year so that they can still produce next year. “Some of the old gals (trees) out there are putting 500 to 1,000 pounds on them. You’re not going to keep a tree healthy with that much weight.”

Foster is bullish on the future of the California avocado industry because he said, “We have the best tasting fruit. We start picking those Hass avocados in February to March, and into July and August, we still have great tasting fruit, at least in this area. I feel sorry for the Chilean growers. They have to pick it early and put it on a boat for two weeks. By the time it hits the grocery shelf it can be four weeks old and cutting black if you’re not careful.”

But Foster certainly knows there are challenges facing North San Diego County growers, especially water costs. “If you don’t have natural water, it’s going to be tough to compete. We are going to have a water rate increase this year (2014) and it’s going to be tough for a place like Valley Center (with little natural water) to survive. I’m not sure it will still be producing four or five years from now.”

He said some areas will be profitable but you have to have a combination of water sources, including well, reverse osmosis and district water. As a Realtor, he has noted that the per acre price of avocado land has come down significantly because of the water situation. Several years

ago, he said the best acreage could command as much as \$35,000 to \$40,000 per acre. “In this past year, the best I’ve gotten is \$25,000 for a prime grove. The average is between \$17,500 and \$20,000 with distressed groves going for \$7,500 to \$15,000. But you have to watch out for those because you are going to lose some trees.”

Despite the challenges, Foster said there is a waiting list for groves of 10 acres and less. “I can’t keep an inventory of 10 acres and smaller.”

He said lots of people see themselves as farmers and an avocado grove offers them that opportunity without the labor-intensive needs that accompany other agricultural crops. A grove owner can hire a grove manager and be a gentleman farmer, so to speak. “There’s no crop better,” Foster said.

As far as 2014 is concerned, he expects it to be a very good year for his grove. Though many are seeing a much lighter crop than this year, he said his trees have rebounded nicely. “I expect 20,000 pounds per acre,” he said.

That would break his record of four years ago when his trees yielded an average of 18,000 pounds per acre. Though he admits that real estate is now his number one pursuit, being an avocado grower “is in my blood. I am still very active in the industry. I’m close friends with at least half the Board (CAC) members and I know most of the groves in the area. I feel like I have been here since the beginning of time!” 🥑