

U.S.: California expecting smallest avocado crop in a decade

The California avocado industry is expecting its smallest crop in a decade following a severe heatwave last year in some of the state's key growing regions.

The California Avocado Committee says current estimates are for production of 175 million pounds (79,000 metric tons), which would be 48% lower than last year's 338 million pounds (153,000MT).

The last time such a small crop was seen was in the 2009 season, when 174.5 million pounds were produced. Between then and the previous season production has fluctuated greatly, ranging from a high of 534.5 million pounds in 2010 to a low of 216 million pounds in 2017.

Two other major players in the global avocado market during the same period – Peru and South Africa – are also expecting year-on-year declines in production this coming season. Tom Bellamore, president of the California Avocado Committee, told FreshFruitPortal.com this year's drop was mainly due to the extremely high temperatures experienced last year. "There are areas that should have had much better production that were really impacted by those temperatures that went well over 100 degrees – some places got 116 or 117 for a short period of time – and unfortunately that took its toll," he said.

He added that cold temperatures in the prior months, along with wildfires the previous year, likely also contributed to the low forecast.

"I think everyone kind of expected this year would be a smaller crop in comparison [to the previous season], but I'm not sure everybody was ready for it being quite this small. But it's hopefully enough volume to keep our customers happy," he said.

On a positive note, heavy winter rainfall has been a big plus for growers, he said, many of whom have not even had to irrigate over recent months. Bellamore said the rains were leading to more robust trees and could potentially lead to larger sizing for some.

The duration of the season is set to be shorter than last year, with peak volumes from late March through July, as opposed to last year when volume continued into September. A higher proportion of fruit will likely stay in the Western U.S. as well.



In terms of market conditions, heavy volumes of Mexican avocados – including record-breaking weeks in the lead up to the Super Bowl – have pushed down prices. Bellamore said it is currently unclear how the market will play out for growers this year, but he noted that there was always strong demand for California fruit.

“California isn’t really a participant in the market at the moment in February, but we’re starting out at what California growers would consider weak prices, so you have to overcome that before they’re willing to even start harvesting,” he said.

“I think everybody has a little bit of a different idea of how strong the market will be this season.”

With the smaller crop, along with ongoing labor shortages, many growers will likely wait for a market opportunity and then pick all their fruit at once, as opposed to higher-volume years when they might pick several times throughout the season, he said.

California avocado exports are normally only in the single digits, but Bellamore said the proportion of exports this could be normal even in spite of the market shorter crop, as companies may find they can fetch better prices in Asian markets like Korea or Japan than in the domestic market.

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