

Avo Farmers Hope to Harvest Big Crop Here

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BY JULIE POUCHER HARBIN

It's early December, and Jerome Stehly inspects a freshly picked bin of organic avocados, some of the first of the season that runs through June.

One of his workers reports on another pile of avocados found farther away in the grove. They were illegally picked by thieves, who likely were planning to haul them away under the cover of night. Two weeks earlier, Stehly lost \$1,000 worth of avocados to theft in the organic avocado grove he owns and manages with his brother, Noel, in Bonsall. This could be a new crime.

He estimates that the avocado groves he manages in Valley Center and Bonsall probably loses between \$50,000 and \$200,000 a year because of theft. That's just one cost of doing business.

This season is actually looking up, with the crop expected to be California's biggest since 1992-93.

"We will probably pick three times as much fruit as we did last year," said Stehly, owner of Stehly Enterprises, a management company for avocados, citrus and flowers. He also is co-owner of Stehly Farms Organics, which grows avocados, citrus and berries. "There are going to be a lot of California avocados for the Super Bowl."

Stehly, who also is a past board chairman of the California Avocado Commission, said consumers can expect to see a "very fair" and "very marketable" price on avocados this year, with such a large avocado crop expected. They should hit local supermarkets early this year, he said.

"We may get a little less for our fruit this coming year on average, but we have more fruit on the trees," said Stehly. "You're going to see retailers having a lot of specials on avocados this year."

The county's avocado industry is concentrated in Bonsall, Fallbrook, Valley Center and Escondido. San Diego County is the top avocado-producing county in the nation.

According to the latest figures available, the 2004 Crop Report by the county's Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures, avocados were the No. 4 crop in the county, valued at \$175 million, after indoor flowering and foliage plants, ornamental trees and shrubs, and bedding plants.

California Avocado Commission Chairman Scott McIntyre estimates that the 2005 crop may have brought in only \$150 million. A few hot days cut the year short. He said the commission is hoping for the value to climb back to \$175 million for 2006 due to the anticipated large crop size.

The commission is predicting the state's yield this year to be 541.7 million pounds; of which San Diego will produce around 219 million pounds, or about 42 percent of the state's avocados.

While California is the biggest consumer of avocados in the United States, McIntyre said demand will continue to increase nationwide this year following an aggressive marketing campaign by the industry and the continuing growth of the Hispanic population throughout the United States.

The avocados sold in San Diego during California's avocado off-season are from Chile. Yet, Chilean avocados have also shown up here in January, making them a competitor.

"They are definitely a big factor because we used to have the market to ourselves; now they start earlier and finish later," said Stehly. They came in with a bigger supply than expected in January 2005; holding back information on how much fruit they were bringing into the market.

Mexico is the world's biggest avocado consumer and producer. They can export to every U.S. state with the exception of the avocado-producing states of California, Florida and Hawaii. Starting in the summer of 2007, that will change when the ban on shipments to those three states is lifted. Avocado exports from Mexico into the United States had been phased in gradually due to perceived pest problems.

McIntyre, an avocado grower himself, said he's not worried about it. "I firmly believe they are going to be a good partner in the global industry. We're preparing for this by coordinating with both the Mexicans and the Chileans in California avocado marketing and advertising programs to utilize our dollars in the best way."

On the flip side, the Mexican avocado market was recently opened up to California producers. In September, the U.S. Department of Agriculture brokered a deal with the Mexican government to allow exports of California-grown Hass avocados to most Mexican states under certain conditions. The USDA said in a press release that industry estimates indicate the agreement could boost California avocado sales by \$6 million to \$24 million.

"This is a long range goal for the California avocado industry and we hope to see sales boost in years to come, but this will be a slow process. We'll be working on the city of Tijuana first, and actually have some packers already able to ship," said McIntyre.

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