

Citrus and Avocado Crops Recover From 2007 Freeze

by Steven Knudsen

After more than a week of sub-freezing temperatures at the beginning of January 2007, severe freeze damage was reported in almost every growing region on the Central Coast. All of the top commodities had been hit hard by the harsh temperatures, but none as hard as the avocado and citrus industry.

That month, San Luis Obispo County received a declaration of emergency from Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, making 10 counties that were adversely affected by the weather eligible for special assistance. An emergency freeze meeting was held at the Farm Bureau office, where Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee facilitated a group discussion with 80 local farmers, governmental officials and local media in the hopes of answering their questions.

In March 2007, County Agriculture Commissioner Bob Lilley report-

ed that county losses had reached \$26 million dollars by mid-January. "Approximately 60 percent of the 2007 avocado crop worth an estimated \$11.5 million was lost," Lilley said. Citrus growers lost approximately 50 percent of the 2007 crop, worth just over \$2 million.

One year ago, there was a huge question as to whether a number of avocado and citrus orchards would recover from the freeze damage. Today, most local avocado and citrus growers are optimistic about higher yields and a premium price for their 2008 crops.

Citrus growers, who began in December to harvest their current crop, are pleased with what they're finding. "The lemon crop is larger than the previous year, and the prices are holding," says Mike Cavaletto of Cavaletto Ranches. "We will pick lemons through July as the fruit rip-

ens and the market holds."

Avocado growers in the Morro Bay area, who lost nearly 100 percent of their crop and 60–80 percent of their trees to the freeze, are in the process of rebounding. "The growers who sustained extensive damage and were forced to stump their avocado orchards after the 2007 freeze are still in recovery mode," says



Gabe Filipe, farm manager and field representative for Mission Produce. "The green re-growth that has now sprouted back from these stumps, mainly last summer and fall, is still too young to produce a substantial amount of flower buds."

The Righetti family, who reported losing 50–60 percent of their 2007 avocado crop, are hopeful for 2008. "We are estimating that avocado yields will be stronger in 2008 and will return



next year as avocado production returns to its pre-freeze numbers.

Consumer demand, meanwhile, has increased in nationwide markets, attributed largely to the California Avocado Commission's marketing of avocado nutrition and quality, according to Frank Alegria, Calavo district field manager for Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties. "California avocado growers currently are harvesting three million pounds of fruit per week. This number will increase by one million pounds per week until harvest reaches its

peak, in April, of around 12 million pounds per week," Alegria says.

As market demand for California avocados continues to increase week by week, growers in

to full production by 2010," says Ernie Righetti. "The trees that experienced freeze damage were pruned or cut back completely and should mature in three years. Those trees have pushed a large amount of new growth and are beginning to flower the 2009 crop."

Avocados spend a full year on the tree before harvesting. The trees bloom in early spring, and the grower has to wait until the following year to harvest the crop. Avocados also are alternate bearing, meaning that if there is a bountiful year one year, the next year is usually lighter.

In 1993, growers were overwhelmed by a flush of fruit that placed a glut of approximately 600 million pounds of fruit on the market. The tremendous supply stemmed from the 1990 freeze that, according to Cayucos avocado grower Bill Coy, "left the majority of the industry's avocado trees black." An oversupply of fruit to market is not projected

San Luis Obispo County will reach peak harvest in July and August. Harvest will begin to taper off in the fall, with the last local avocados leaving the market in November and early December. "The growers who are fortunate enough to have fruit to harvest for this summer and fall season will experience strong returns for the 2008 crop," says Filipe.

Photos

Far left – One year of growth shows on this Hass avocado tree at the Righetti ranch.

Lower left – Freeze damage caused many growers to stump back trees.

Top left – Lemon sapling replaces tree destroyed by freeze.

Above – 2008 lemons are ready for harvest.

Photos by Steven Knudsen.

