

Drought, pest concerns bite into avocados

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

Ed McFadden, a third generation California avocado grower, is living his dream.

"I was raised on an avocado and citrus grove in Orange County and then worked in a grove when I graduated from college," he said. "My wife and I always had the goal of raising our children on a farm and were fortunate to be able to have our own farm. I also manage other groves for long-time partners of our family."

There are currently about 52,000 acres planted to avocados in California. Avocado trees can bear fruit the year after planting but start producing commercial quantities of fruit after 3-5 years.

"I enjoy the challenge of farming avocados and the lifestyle. I am proud to bring our great California product to the U.S. market and beyond," he said.

The public loves the deliciously creamy orbs but McFadden, a member of the California Avocado Commission and its former chairman,



Courtesy of California Avocado Commission

Ed McFadden, a third-generation California avocado grower, is shown with his avocado trees. More than 52,000 acres are planted to avocados in California. Trees reach full production at 3-5 years.

said there are some misconceptions.

"I would say that the health benefits of avocados

are misunderstood," he said. "Research has shown that the healthy fats in avocados

and the nutrient dense nature

of the fruit make it a 'superfood.'"

Growers have received good returns for their avoca-

dos over the past five years and they remain hopeful for a strengthening market for the balance of the season, although imports can be a problem if the market is oversupplied.

"What imports have done for the U.S. market is to give us a year-round supply of avocados and helped stabilize the market," McFadden said. "The risk of introducing a pest or disease into California from a source outside of the U.S. is always a concern, but so far, safeguards seem to be keeping us safe."

The good news for California growers is they are close to their market.

"I grow avocados a little over an hour's drive from downtown Los Angeles and millions of eager consumers," he says.

Despite the rosy picture of growing the popular produce, there are challenges facing the industry.

"We have several challenges that are of concern," he said. "The drought in California is causing problems on several levels. There are places in a few growing areas where groundwater is dropping to very low levels and

wells are going dry. In other parts of the state our wells are low but still producing, but we have had five years of below-average rainfall."

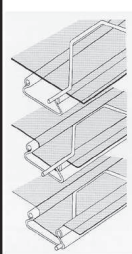
Avocados grow and produce much better with normal amounts of pure rain leaching the salts out of the grove soils, he says. "Salts that have accumulated in our soils are damaging trees in many regions."

Another problem is an insect pest that carries a fungal disease that impacts avocados and many other host trees. This tiny beetle, called a shot hole borer, was found in Los Angeles County four years ago and has been spreading through the urban forests since, he says. About a year and a half ago the insect pest was found in San Diego County groves. A few months ago it was found in several areas in Ventura County, he says.

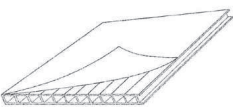
The California Avocado Commission is fighting back. It has spent more than \$2.5 million to find ways to control the pest and diseases that it carries. They have also worked to build coalitions at all levels of government to fight the pest.

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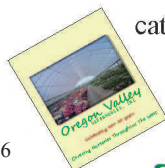
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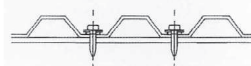
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