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FUTURE PRODUCTION TRENDS

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In order to forecast the future production trends of the avocado industry, we must consider several factors which will build the foundation for predictions.

First, how many trees do we have, and where are they planted?

The State-reported figures show, now, a total of 17,000 acres planted to avocados in California.

San Diego County has a little over half of all this acreage. One eighth of the plantings are in Orange County. Nearly a quarter of the plantings are in Los Angeles County. Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties have under 10% together. Riverside and San Bernardino Counties are just getting their feet wet.

Escondido and Fallbrook have nearly identical acreage. Of their combined acreage, about one-half is not yet in production. Just put these non-bearing trees all in one district. Imagine all the avocados here in Escondido as just planted, or only 3-4 years old—that gives you an idea of the big potential production increase that is in store.

Of the total 17,000 acres, 14,500 acres are now considered bearing—that is, 5 years old or older—and 2500 acres, non-bearing. At the end of 5 years, it is possible that all of these 17,000 acres could be in bearing.

Now, that sounds like a good place to start in making a prediction on how big or how small the crops are going to be in the future—but it isn't. You see, some of us believe that the State acreage figures are not exactly correct. A tree census, which each county is conducting now, might prove that there are at least 2,000 more acres than are on record—so that fact knocks the foundations right out from under any prediction I might make. If you could tell me how many acres there actually are—predictions would be easier. However, for the sake of discussion, let's use the present State report as it stands.

Next, what arc the future plantings going to be ? Avocado planting on raw land has definitely slowed down—there just isn't enough new water available. That seems to be the general situation here in San Diego County. The big trend of planting now is in the replacement of citrus and walnut groves—in other areas where water is available. There are probably 30 to 40,000 acres in southern California now planted to other crops that could be planted to avocados—but will they be? If you will tell me what the nation's economic conditions are going to be;

and how avocado profits will compare with citrus profits, I'll try to tell you how many more avocado acres might be planted in the next 5 years.

However, because of the number of groves going out each year from root-rot, freeze injury, subdivision, and just plain non-commercial, the trend in plantings seems to show a net increase each year of nearly 500 acres. So, we'll use that figure for a spring board.

In Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties, the interest is in Fuerte, Mac-Arthur, Edranol, and Rincon particularly, and in some of the old standard summer varieties, generally. From a planting and production standpoint, Ventura County will probably show the most rapid percentage increase in the future. Ventura County boasts the highest average yield per acre record, and the interest there in replacing old citrus and some walnuts is very keen. They have just under a thousand acres now, but could easily more than double the figures in the next few years.

One of these days, the Corona area, in Riverside County, may take on some real importance in the avocado industry. Right now, there are prospects for some 200 acres; and it is felt that an eventual total of 2,000 acres is possible. The variety plot at the Citrus Experiment Station in Riverside is doing some really valuable work for the Riverside County folks.

One thing is certain—the growers to the north are trying out every new or hopeful variety. Let's hope they find something good—and let's also hope that they promptly eliminate the ones which are commercially unsound.

Now, let's take a quick glance at production records.

Using, again, the State-reported figures, we find that during the past 15 years, production has averaged just about one ton per acre per year. I know that this figure sounds ridiculously low—but, remember, these bearing acre figures include all trees over 5 years old; in all conditions; and all varieties. The encouraging fact is that this average of the past 15 crops shows a definite progressive improvement (if you break the years into small groups) starting at 1600 Ibs. per acre and increasing to 2150 Ibs. per acre.

The highest of the big crops in that period have averaged around 2700 Ibs. per acre; with a very definite increase at the rate of about 80 Ibs. per acre per year in each succeeding big crop. In 1943-44, the biggest crop, the average production per acre was 3200 Ibs.

On the other side of the picture, the lowest "lows" have averaged around 1400 Ibs. per acre and, even here, there is a marked improvement in the Ibs. per acre in each succeeding small crop.

Well, let's put these factors together and see what we get. With all the present 17,000 acres in production 5 to 6 years from now, you could get a "bumper" crop of 64 million Ibs. You could get a "low" crop of 25 million Ibs. The biggest bumper crop to date was 42 million Ibs.; the most recent real low crop was about 19 million Ibs. That gives you some idea of the comparison to now, and the possibility for the immediate future.

In 10 years, with 500 acres added each year (and remember that not all of these would be in production) you could have 19,500 acres producing a bumper crop of nearly 80 million Ibs.; in 20 years, you could just about break 100 million Ibs.

You folks realize as well as I do that making predictions on something where you can't have all of the accurate facts accumulated just isn't worth the effort—look at what happened to Gallup and Roper!

The figures I've used are deliberately conservative. It is quite probable that these figures will be exceeded before the time limits I have set.

The important thing for all of us to realize is that the industry is growing and will continue to grow. There are literally millions of people who have not yet tried avocados. They haven't tried them for at least two reasons. One is that the crops haven't been big enough to pay for the expense of introducing and distributing them to every hamlet, village, and town. Another is that many millions of people simply can't afford to buy them at the present price levels. As the crops do get bigger, these people will have to be persuaded to use avocados. Part of that persuasion will undoubtedly have to be a compromise in price. For some of you, the prospect of greatly increased crops may not be an optimistic outlook; thinking in terms of average price per pound returns.

For the individual grower, this does mean a constant effort to increase his per acre yield in order to maintain his total dollar income. Because the trend now, and in the future, is for larger plantings—and heavier production—I think you will agree with me that probably many of the very small and marginal groves will be forced out of existence.

However, there is an optimistic side to the picture. With all the facts we know now, and with all of the "new" people to educate into eating avocados, it just doesn't seem possible that we can raise more avocados than the people in this country can be persuaded to eat. Not even with Florida, Cuba, and Texas production thrown in. Our ideas of returns and profits may have to be adjusted downward, but in the long run I am confident that this will be a profitable industry. In the gradual evolution, that profit will go to those growers who have the most efficient groves, the best managed groves, and the best situated groves from a production standpoint.

Continual growth is certain. It can either grow like "Topsy"—and I mean "topsy-turvy"; or it can continue to grow with intelligent teamwork. We have worked together intelligently for the past 25 years—the same cooperation can make the very best out of whatever lies ahead.