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THE AVOCADO INDUSTRY OF VENTURA COUNTY AT A GLANCE

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During the past thirty years the rapid growth of the avocado industry has been one of the notable achievements of agriculture in Ventura County. The transition has been from a dooryard curiosity to a commercial industry comprising approximately 4300 acres. The development of the avocado industry of Ventura County parallels that of California.

ACREAGE

Avocado acreage in Ventura County has increased steadily from 507 acres in 1945 to 4296 in 1971. In acreage it ranks second only to San Diego County.

Of the total acreage, 3155 are bearing and 1141 are nonbearing. About 500 new acres are being planted each year.

LAND AVAILIBILITY

New plantings of avocados are expected to continue throughout the county where climatic conditions will permit and where water is available. With most of the flat land already in agriculture, new avocado developments will be on new land or land converted from other crops such as walnuts and oranges that are under economic pressures. Bare land values range from $2000 per acre for rough, steep, or rocky land up to $6000 for more desirable crop land suitable for replanting to avocados.

Barren foothills are available but without water. As water, either supplemental or locally developed, becomes available, additional acreage can be planted.

Although urbanization will restrict some avocado development, its effect will be minimized because most plantings are not near urban developments. Practically no avocado acreage has been removed for this purpose.

VARIETIES

Twenty years ago many varieties were being tried experimentally. Today only a few of these remain in commercial plantings and include the Hass, Bacon, Zutano, Rincón, MacArthur, and Fuerte. Others that have fallen by the wayside and exist only in small plantings include Nabal, Dickinson, Anaheim, Corona, Bonita, Hellen, Edranol, to name a few.

The avocado industry of Ventura County is pretty well satisfied with Hass and Bacon as the major recommended varieties. Hass is number 1 and is planted in relatively warm locations. Bacon is number 2 and is planted in colder locations and for windbreak purposes. Our recommendation is to topwork Rincons to Hass or Bacon and to keep MacArthur but not plant any more.

There has been some topworking of less desirable varieties. The Fuerte, though an excellent fruit, produces poorly in most of Ventura County. Notable exceptions are a few small plantings in Ojai Valley and the foothill slope between Santa Paula and Fillmore.

KEY PRODUCTION FACTORS

Although Ventura County avocado industry is growing and progressing, it is not without its share of problems, most of which are typical for the industry in other areas:

Climate — (1) Winter frost hazard, (2) sudden heat spells, (3) strong, dry east winds, (4) low mean temperature during flowering and fruit setting.

Soils — (1) Clay or fine textured, poorly drained soils, (2) shallow or rocky soils, (3) soils with high lime content.

Water — (1) Quantity is good and limited mainly to wells, (2) quality is poor - No. 2 - with 1000 to 2000 ppm dissolved solids. Fortunately, it is low in chloride and sodium.

Labor — No appreciable problem. Most avocados are owner-operated or a part of a large diversified farming operation.

CULTURAL PROBLEMS

Insects — Normal for industry. Some damage by chewing insects, brown mite, greenhouse thrips, snails, and ants. Under good biological control. Treatment seldom required other than for snails and ants.

Diseases — Avocado root rot number 1 problem. Increasing problem on severe hazard soils. Sun-blotch and oak root fungus of minor importance.

Harvesting — Of concern to many are the plantings on steep slopes and the picking problems they create. Several growers have purchased mechanical man-positioning equipment to aid picking.

Pruning — The pruning or training of tall-upright growing varieties needs to be investigated.

Irrigation — Most new plantings are under drip irrigation. Some mature orchards are being converted to this new concept of irrigation. No problems are anticipated through the first five years of an orchard. How to expand the drip system to accommodate mature trees will be worked on as the problem arises.

Orchard Thinning — As groves mature, there is a need to thin trees to prevent overcrowding which results in lower production and increased harvest costs.

Variable Production — More uniform producing varieties are needed to stabilize

annual production. In lieu of the above, research work is being done on the effects of cross pollination and girdling on production of present varieties.

COSTS

The Ventura County study of Sample Costs to Produce Avocados for 1970 shows the following per acre costs:

Cultural	$248
Cash Overhead	$197
Total Cash Preharvest	$445
Depreciation	$298
Total Cost and Depreciation	$743
Interest	$385
Total Preharvest Costs	$1,128

FUTURE AND OUTLOOK

Current acreage estimates have shown the California industry to be in an expansion phase.

The outlook for avocados in Ventura County appears favorable. With increasing land values, especially in the more climatically favored areas of the state, crops yielding high returns must be grown. The avocado meets this requirement.

Assuming taxes, zoning, and fruit returns remain favorable for avocados, any increase in acreage will depend on the loss of other crop acreage or the development of water sources on presently unplanted land.

Avocados have one advantage over other horticultural crops. They can be successfully planted on land considered too steep for other crops.

The potential high returns, increased per capita consumption, improved varieties, and cultural practices are sufficient reasons to justify the avocado a place in Ventura County's agriculture for many years. In fact, some day the 1926 prediction of 20,000 acres made by Vincent Blanchard, then Farm Advisor, may become a reality.