

Fire Burns Ventura County Groves

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A wildfire burned the Santa Paula area of Ventura County late April, causing more than \$1.2 million in damages to area avocado groves, according to Earl McPhail, Ventura County ag commissioner.

Seventeen growers lost 263 acres of trees, mostly avocado, to the 10,000-acre wildfire that burned through the dry hills. Eight hundred thousand pounds of fruit and many low-pressure irrigation systems were also destroyed.

The fire spread easily through area groves, as burning irrigation hoses carried the fire along rows and ignited the dry leaf mulch. Damage was significant. Some orchards were completely burned; others lost fruit to intense heat. Much of the remaining fruit will be downgraded. Trees which lost bloom to the fire will not carry a crop next year.

Replacement of burned irrigation systems is already underway, and will cost growers about \$600 per acre, estimates Rex Laird, executive director of the Ventura County Farm Bureau. Evaluation of tree damage will take longer. (See Ben Faber's article on page 20). Avocado grower Gordon Kimball says he lost this year's and next year's crop on about 80 of the 110 acres he farms between Fillmore and Santa Paula. "We are waiting to see how many trees were actually destroyed," he said. "There is a lot of heat damage to limbs and some trunks have fire damage, but there is a very good chance most of the trees will come back."

The cause of the fire was arcing between two low-voltage power lines north of Fillmore. Fire swept through brush in canyon areas in several directions, fanned by winds up to 50 miles per hour. The 90 degree days and low humidity were ideal conditions for the spread of wildfire, said Sandi Wells, public information officer of the Ventura County Fire Protection District. Parts of the area burned by the wildfire had not burned in the past 100 years and were heavily covered with dry brush, Wells said.