

Tree Pull Application Drive a Success

Nearly 500 USDA Tree Removal Program applications were received by the PMC by the close of the January sign-up period. With the successful push by the PBA, Sunsweet, independent packers, and the PMC, over \$17 million in total applications were received, effectively establishing a waiting list of growers who want to remove trees to reduce production and return the industry to profitability.

In part, the industry reached this goal thanks to the efforts of PBA members and staff. Many PBA members signed up for the program and in turn they encouraged their friends and neighbors to do likewise. Newsletters, phone outreach, and two field meetings hosted by PBA helped the industry effort to generate participation. Many additional applications were received at two PBA hosted meetings held in the south Sacramento Valley. In addition, a number of growers also turned to the PBA office for help in getting their applications filed on time with the PMC office in Sacramento.

A total of 60 applications were received on the closing day at the PMC office and Rich Peterson gives credit to PBA efforts for getting the word out. "On paper we have gone over the top of the \$17 million," reports Peterson. "The PBA meetings were instrumental in getting the word out and generating the additional applications that helped put us over the top. While the applications will need to be reviewed and some may not qualify, this is very good news for the industry."

At the field meetings, PBA manager, Greg Thompson, encouraged growers to sign up for the program and pointed out that growers will benefit by removing their least

productive blocks. He also pointed out that a fallow period could be used to reduce or eliminate certain key soil pests. PMC representatives were on hand to bring growers up to date on the application process and answer their questions.

Thanks to everyone who helped make this effort a success.

Growers Asked to Make Decision & Stick with It

While most growers who applied to the USDA Orchard Removal Program have made up their mind to push out an orchard, some growers may not be sure if they are going to go ahead or not. For the good of all concerned, such growers are asked to make a final decision as quickly as possible so that all of the limited USDA funds may be utilized. Growers who delay making a decision may tie up funds and prevent others from being accepted into the program. If the funds are not used they will be lost to the industry.

Applicants Receive Authorization to Pull—Final Rule Pending

So far, over 140 growers have received authorization to go ahead with tree removal under the USDA program. The USDA gave the go ahead for the PMC to start to release authorization forms even though the final rule making has not been completed. While no major changes are anticipated to the final rule, the USDA is required to review all comments received during the comment period. 12 comments were filed and ranged from a request to extend the application period to alternative methods of tree removal to adding grapevines to the plant back restriction. One prune packer posted a comment in opposition to

the tree pull. A concerned consumer suggested that uprooted prune trees be sent to Afghanistan and replanted as a humanitarian and goodwill gesture! Comments may be viewed on the Internet at:

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/modockets/prunecomments/2001prunes.htm>

Government Purchases Boost Shipments 4%—follow-through Essential

While total industry shipments through January are up 4% due to an increase of over 6,000 tons in government purchases, domestic market shipments excluding government was down by 4.5% and exports were off 2%. With the dollar growing stronger, key export markets such as Germany, Italy, the UK, and Japan were down by anywhere from 7 to 13%. Offsetting these drops were gains in Poland, Sweden, Spain, China, and Taiwan so that overall exports fell only 2%.

Although shipments fluctuate from year to year, the strong dollar and large crops elsewhere in the world this past year don't bode well for industry shipments in the short term. The industry is counting on growers to follow through on their tree pull commitments in order to bring supply in line with demand. The weak showing in the domestic market is of especial concern because it is unlikely that the government will continue to make large purchases. The industry plan presented to USDA to secure tree-pull funding promised that tree-pull acreage reduction will get the industry back in balance and the industry will not expect large government purchases of dried plums over the next 4 or 5 years.

PBA Annual Meeting to Feature Noted Speakers

Wednesday, March 6 will be the day for PBA members and invited guests to review the past year and consider how to make a brighter future. Despite widespread pessimism, some good things are happening in our industry and there is reason for hope. In his annual address, PBA President Neill Mitchell will show that not all is gloom and doom for the dried plum industry.

The events of September 11th have permanently changed the political landscape and present new challenges and new opportunities; the farm bill debate points to greater government involvement in specialty crops. Understanding these new political realities and trends will be the focus of a panel discussion and a question and answer session. Topping off the event will be keynote speaker, Stuart Somach, who will address the fallout of the Kalmath Basin water debacle.

The cost of the luncheon is \$10 per person and reservations are required. Contact the PBA office at 530-674-5636 for more information.

Editorially Speaking

Neill Mitchell, PBA President

Snake Oil Salesmen

I guess I shouldn't be surprised that some clever fellows are reportedly offering no-price contracts to entice growers out of the tree-pull program. Apparently these fellows are doing just fine with field prices below production costs and they are evidently willing to bet the future of the prune business on the chance for a fast buck.

Growers have to realize that people like this have no interest in their future. Growers need only to look at how much better the industry will fare with balanced supplies and reasonable field prices to realize that reducing acreage will benefit everyone. We have heard that some

of these snake oil boys are refusing to guarantee PBA prices.

If you are a grower who has been approached by one of these guys and you can't resist the snake oil lure, then at least insist on the PBA price and a very long term. Actually, you should ask for a large bonus above the PBA price, because if these guys are successful in undermining the tree-pull, the PBA price won't be worth much. Think about it.

It would also be in a grower's best interest to call the PBA office to discuss any contract offers made. Regardless of the implications made by some of the PBA detractors, the fact is that PBA members share the same common interest as any other prune grower. Growers facing difficult decisions will be better served by advice and support from other growers rather than advice from someone who is only looking out for their own selfish interest. The old time purveyors of magic elixirs could never stand much scrutiny on the ingredients of their products and I don't believe that this small group that seems willing to undermine a good program can stand much light on their actions either.

Congressman Doug Ose

In our last oration, we mentioned the work that Congressman Herger had done to finally get the USDA tree pull moving but failed to credit the hard work that Doug Ose and his staff put in behind the scenes to move the program forward. Doug has been a staunch advocate for his district and the farming community. Unfortunately for us in Sutter County, Doug's district has been changed to exclude much of his core farm support through redistricting. When he runs for reelection this year, he will be running in a district much different than before. We have talked to farmers from Elk Grove that will vote in Doug's new district and they are solidly behind Doug as a candidate who still believes that agriculture counts in California. Our thanks and best wishes to Doug Ose.

Sunsweet/PBA Tree Pull

Remember that if you are turned down by the USDA tree pull to contact Greg Thompson at PBA or Mark Dalrymple at Sunsweet Growers to determine if something can be done for you. Our goal is to get as many trees out of the ground as possible so it is likely that if your orchard is alive and has been consistently farmed and the trees still look like trees that there may be funds available.

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