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## **Booth Ranches citrus production continues to grow as young plantings mature**

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Booth Ranches LLC in Orange Cove, CA, a leading grower, packer and shipper of citrus from California's San Joaquin Valley, will see an increase in volume for the 2013-14 season as young plantings continue to mature.

Neil Galone, vice president of marketing, told *The Produce News* three years ago that the company had then about 8,500 acres of citrus planted, about half of which was currently in production and the rest was young plantings, "so our volume is expected to double over the next five years." Navels accounted for about two-thirds of the total volume and Valencias about one-third, "with some miscellaneous [varieties] thrown in."

About all that has changed since then, in terms of the company's production, is that those young plantings continue to mature, bringing Booth Ranches the anticipated yearly volume increases.

"We've got continued growth coming from existing plantings," Galone said Oct. 11. "We've got young trees in the ground. They are continuing to grow, so our volume will continue to grow over the next couple of years."



Neil Galone Starting about four years ago, the company was “pretty aggressive in putting new trees in the ground” for a couple of years, he said. But since then, “we have slowed down on that a little bit, waiting for the crop to catch up.”

Booth Ranches continues packing its fruit in two packinghouses in Orange Cove, Galone said. One is located on the company ranches and is referred to as Booth 1. The other, called Booth 2, was previously the Sunny Cove Citrus LLC facility and was acquired three years ago, giving the company adequate capacity for anticipated growth. “They do fulfill our needs,” he said.

Within those facilities, however, the packingline capacity continues to expand. Demand for bagged citrus continues to grow, and “we do see the demand for bags as an opportunity,” Galone said. “A lot of the retailers that we deal with like that kind of package, so every year we increase our bagging capacity in order to meet that demand.”

The company packs bags, primarily mesh bags, of “virtually every size” including four-pound, five-pound, eight-pound and 10-pound sizes, with 4s and 8s being the most popular, he said.

The packing facilities and the production facilities are all third-party-certified for food safety. “We are now GAP-certified all the way back to the farm,” Galone said. “We decided to take it above and beyond the Produce Traceability Initiative. Everything that we pack is now totally bar coded” for traceability, but in addition, the entire operation is food- safety certified. “We are as far as we can go at this point” with regard to both food safety and traceability, he said.

New on domestic sales this season at Booth Ranches is Matt Cheney, “a young guy out of Fresno State [University] who is new to the business,” Galone said. Tracy Jones continues as vice president of domestic sales, Isaac Du Toit as vice president of export sales, and Aaron Miller as sales manager.

With regard to the 2013-14 Navel crop, “we are thinking that Monday, the 21st [of October] will be our first day of packing,” Galone said. “We are finishing up Valencias right now.” They had all been packed, and he expected the last of them to be shipped within the next three days, giving the company about a week to get ready for the Navel packing season.

When the Navels start, it usually takes a few days “to get up to volume,” Galone said. But he expected that by the week of Oct. 28, a good volume of fruit should be running through the facility.

“The flavor already looks good, well ahead of where it normally is this time of year,” and now it was

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just a matter of waiting for color, he said. “By the time we have color, we will be well ahead of what is required by the California Standard,” so the first fruit to market should have good flavor.

Size-wise, “we are thinking we are going to be peaking to start with probably 72s then 56s then 88s,” which is smaller than last year but about in the middle of the normal size range. There will be some larger fruit, he said, “but I think promotable sizes as we move forward are going to be in the 72 to 56 size range.

Quality looks good, he added.

In addition to oranges, “we do have a small [W. Murcott] Mandarin program,” which will begin around late January, Galone said. “We don’t have any early mandarin varieties.”

In oranges, “we only pack fruit that we grow ourselves,” he said. But Mandarins are “one exception” to that policy. Booth Ranches still grows most of the Mandarins it packs and markets, but “we do take a handful of fruit from outside growers” in order to fill out the program a bit.

That was an arrangement the company entered into cautiously. “We wanted to make sure that if we did align ourselves with any other growers, that they had the same philosophy we did” and that the fruit was good enough to be packed under the “Booth Ranches” label, Galone told The Produce News in announcing the program a year ago.

Previously, Booth’s Murcotts had been marketed by outside marketing companies under their labels.

“This is our attempt to try to bring some of that back in-house” to “expand as best we can the offerings that we have for our customers,” he said.

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