

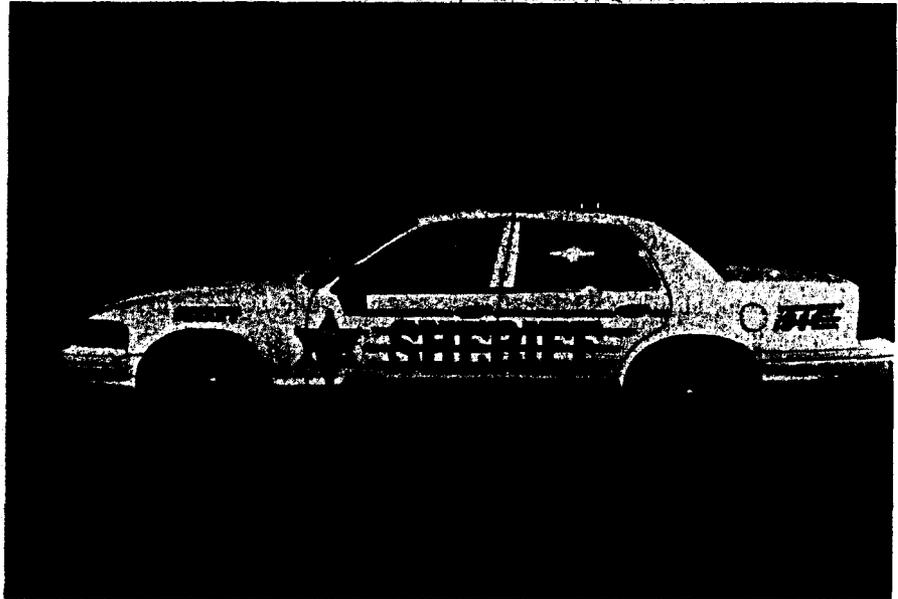


# Walnut Theft Down by Half in Tulare County

By Don A. Wright, Contributing Writer

A new ordinance helped cut walnut theft calls to the Tulare County Ag Crime Task Force by half during the 2012 walnut harvest. There are 9,000 acres of commercial walnut orchards with a farm gate value of \$140 million in Tulare County according to County Ag Commissioner Marilyn Kinoshita.

Kinoshita said thieves would go into an orchard and scoop up buckets full of walnuts that had been shaken from the trees. The thieves would take the stolen nuts to a roadside cash buyer who would in turn resale the combined nuts to a processor or dehydrator. During harvest walnuts are shaken from trees and raked into rows before being



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gathered and transported to processors. The gathered nuts made a tempting target for thieves.

"The problem was so bad growers were hiring security guards," said Kinoshita. "Thieves could fill sacks with nuts and ride off on bicycles. The sheriff's department was prevented from dealing with other ag crimes due to the number of calls about walnut theft."

The ordinance prohibits purchases of nuts without proper documentation until after the Chandler variety of walnuts have been harvested usually sometime during November. A record book is required to show proof of ownership before walnuts can be sold. This documentation makes it much easier for sheriffs to identify legitimate transactions.

Sergeant John Dow of the Ag Task Force said road side vendors were paying cash for walnuts and some of the nuts could be from backyard trees but many were from thieves. "Now they [cash buyers] have to wait until after harvest to purchase nuts. These gleaned nuts also require documentation and that prevents the thieves from getting quick cash."

Dow said it would be difficult to quantify the savings reaped from enforcing the ordinance but any reduction in crime is saving not only growers but tax payers money. "Prior to the ordinance patrol officers were inundated with calls," said Dow. "Last year we were freed up to pursue other crimes and that has been a benefit for everyone."

Anne Hester and her husband Gary, own Hester Orchards in Farmersville. They are walnut growers and operate a dehydrator facility located in Tulare County.

"We had many occasions where we confronted the thieves in the fields picking up walnuts to sell at these road side stands for quick cash," said Hester. "Sometimes they would be in fields before we even harvested them. Each year more roadside stands would go up as walnut season/harvesting started paying cash for walnuts."

Another concern to growers is the quality of the nuts. Under legitimate operations dehydrators and processors can trace any contaminated product back to the individual lot, grower and field of origin. Having roadside cash buyers



mixing any and all nuts stolen or not erases the chain of accountability should any unsafe product be introduced.

"We have spent thousands of dollars to have security patrol our fields to catch thieves during harvest time," said Hester. "The sheriff was catching thieves, prosecuting them and sending them to jail. Several we caught were already wanted on other warrants here in the county. But we were still seeing losses."

Hester said despite considerable efforts by growers and the Ag Crime Task Force, more help was needed. She contacted the Tulare County Farm Bureau and a meeting of walnut growers

was called.

"We also had representatives from the Ag Commissioners office, District Attorney's office, Supervisors office, Sherriff's office, Rural Ag Crime Unit who were just as interested in getting this stopped as we were," said Hester.

This started the ball rolling and after several discussions with Kinoshita and representatives of the District Attorney's office the new ordinance was written and adopted by the Board of Supervisors. Growers were so happy with the results, they bought the Sheriff's Office a police dog as thanks.

The ordinance has proven to be an effective tool in fighting walnut theft, so much so that Butte County has adopted a very similar ordinance and Glenn County is considering doing likewise.

"There are lots of stories of catching walnut thieves over the years and fortunately no one has gotten hurt yet," said Hester. "These roadside stands have lots of cash on hand to buy stolen walnuts or any other commodity for resale. I just worry someone is going to get hurt in the process, and that's usually a bystander." PNP

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