

will require making tough decisions to ultimately rebuild only some of what was lost.

## Politics of picking

In the meantime, the Nobles have taken measures to ensure the crop isn't entirely wasted. For one, they began selling at Chico's Saturday Farmers' Market in early October for the first time since the Camp Fire.

"People there have been really supportive and appreciative that we're back there," Laurie said.

The Nobles also instituted a "U-Pick" program, inviting people to come to their orchard to pick apples for \$1 a pound. They're requiring visitors to show proof of vaccination and wear masks, causing detractors to lambast them on social media.

"The COVID thing has really stopped a lot of people and irritated some," Laurie said.

"But it's our choice, and we've already been through enough disaster with what you see here ... and don't see here," she continued, indicating the damaged farm. "The

Granny Smith apples on the tree at Noble Orchards.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF NOBLE ORCHARDS

thought of him or I not being here is unbearable, and then the business wouldn't exist at all."

Jim noted there are also liability issues if someone is infected while picking apples. "We'd just as soon avoid all that. If some people aren't happy and want to call us names that's their problem."

"We've also had a lot of people call and come out who appreciate the rules," Laurie said. "They like that they can come out to a place they know they'll be safe. We've had people come bring everyone from the kids to the great-grandparents, four generations picking apples together."

Culleton called the actions of those who've criticized the Nobles over their COVID rules "unconscionable." He lamented how everything has become so divisive and politicized—even picking apples—in the post-Trump era.

"The Nobles are a cornerstone of our community; they're our neighbors and need support," he said. "Their orchards are also part of the history of Paradise ... after gold mining, there was logging, and when Paradise was cleared, people planted apple orchards. They



used to be everywhere here, and now that's the last working orchard here."

Indeed, the Nobles would be marking the centennial of the family business this year but passed on holding any celebrations due to COVID uncertainty and the lack of infrastructure at the farm.

Rains have cut into the Noble's U-Pick efforts, and the recent heavy storm knocked down a few trees that Jim had to push back up, but Laurie said that the needed precipitation is the best possible disruption. The Nobles couldn't predict a date they'll end U-Picking, as there's no way to tell exactly when the apples will no longer be good, but said it's a matter of weeks at best.

Even if the apples don't sell, the Nobles said they hate to see them go to waste. They've already donated 700 pounds of apples to Dixie Fire relief efforts and said they're happy to consider donating to other organizations aimed at fire or hunger relief. That is, as long as organizations can pick the crop themselves.

"If someone can organize 20 or so people to come clear the apples and deliver them to Plumas County or wherever they're needed, that would be great," Laurie said. "It just makes sense that if we have a surplus of food nobody is using, then let's get it to them." □

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