EGAP Holds the Line, Avoids Ag Water Rate Increases

By Ken Melban
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The Escondido Growers for Agricultural Preservation (EGAP) were pleased when the Escondido City Council unanimously voted in February against increasing rates for agricultural water customers. The approved agricultural rates will remain at the same level.

Significant credit for the Council's decision rests squarely with EGAP and its advocacy efforts. Led by avocado farmers and businessmen Eddie Grangetto and Phil Henry, this effort demonstrates how organized stakeholders, with a story to tell and a possible solution to offer, can wage a successful campaign.

"We were encouraged that the city, in their recent action, continued to hold agricultural water pricing at current levels in preparation for bringing the new recycled water system on line," said Grangetto.

In 2011, the city was facing a very costly construction project to increase the capacity of its wastewater line running from Escondido 14 miles out to the ocean. As the preliminary planning and projected price tag became public knowledge, another idea began to surface, and EGAP was formed.

"We thought it made sense to develop an improved recycled water system and thereby avoid the increasing volume of outflow to the ocean," said Henry. "Plus, this new supply of recycled water would provide a high quality sustainable water source for the local avocado industry and maintain a $240 million economic contribution for the city."

This $240 million economic contribution Henry refers to is based on a study the California Avocado Commission funded to support EGAP's effort. "There was a critical need for EGAP to define and develop a factual justification of the avocado industry's economic contribution to the city in the form of jobs, farm gate value of $40 million, and how that money multiplied as it flowed through to become part of the makeup of the city's gross economic product in purchases of farm chemicals, fertilizer, insurance, banking, etc.," said John Burr, Escondido avocado grower and EGAP member. "Charley Wolk and Ken Melban organized a third party independent team of agricultural economists to conduct a study that was highly successful in accomplishing EGAP's need for the economic analysis."

The study, "Agriculture in Escondido- Contributions, Challenges and Opportunities," was led by Dr. Mechel Paggi, director of the Center for Agricultural Business, California State University, Fresno. In addition to quantifying agriculture's economic contributions, the report included other factors like agriculture's role in the preservation of open and green space, in serving as a buffer against wildfire, and the carbon sequestration associated with tree crop production such as avocado.

"Support of EGAP's effort by the Commission is a prime example of how they are supporting avocado growers, at the local level, to meet one of the Commission's overarching strategic objectives of maintaining a California avocado industry with critical mass," said Grangetto.

Within the City of Escondido service area, there are approximately 400 avocado growers who produce on just over 3,300 acres. From 2005 to 2011, the Escondido area experienced a 40 percent reduction in avocado acreage, primarily due to the escalating cost of water. It was industry concern over this downward trend and visionary leadership that was the genesis for EGAP and its success. EGAP recognized and convinced the city leaders that losing agriculture would not benefit the community of Escondido nor its citizens.

The new recycled water system will be introduced in phases, with Phase I delivering water to approximately one thousand acres of avocados, followed by Phase II to a comparable amount of acreage. The system is comprised of a main line that delivers tertiary-treated water to a membrane plant, where the water will be passed through reverse osmosis to remove additional salts, generating water that will meet the quality specifications necessary for avocado production. From there, it passes through a distribution network to the avocado groves. This system is expected to be online by 2016 and will likely be the primary supply for the local avocado industry. Pricing is expected to be in a range that maintains a viable, competitive and sustainable avocado industry into the future.