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Sustainability: What Does It Mean and Why Is It Important

“Sustainability” is a term that has become more common over the last few years. Companies are more frequently touting the importance they place on sustainable practices. But what exactly does sustainability mean?

That’s a great question, and the definition varies depending on whom you ask. When we’ve talked with growers, they tend to speak about the sustainability (in other words, the longevity or viability) of the California avocado industry and, to some degree, their own businesses. While that is completely understandable and important, the term sustainability doesn’t primarily focus on the future economic viability of an individual company or even an industry.

While economic factors are part of sustainability, so are environmental and societal factors. When we speak of the sustainability profile of a company or an industry, we are considering its use of fossil fuels, carbon footprint, treatment of workers, impact on water quality, etc. Sustainability is about how well your company and aggregate industry protect the earth’s resources, and the impact they have on the environment, society and the economy. The sustainability life-cycle profile of a California avocado grove encompasses the development of the land in preparation for planting the avocado trees, the power required to bring water to your grove, the transportation of fruit to market and everything in between.

Recently, buyers have asked some

California avocado packers to complete a sustainability profile questionnaire. Questions asked for information concerning:

- Crop Supply Mapping (identify country, region, or farm)
- Child Labor Use
- Fertilizer Applications (focus on nitrogen and phosphorous use)
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions
- Labor Rights
- Pesticide Applications

With the increase in global trade, most buyers rely on multiple countries of origin for supplies. Buyers are facing increasing pressure from consumers to make sure they are “sourcing responsibly.” An increasing number of consumers want to ensure that the produce they are purchasing is being produced in a manner that doesn’t exploit workers and protects the environment. Information suggests that millennials are willing to pay more for products and services from companies that are committed to making a positive social and environmental impact.

Answering sustainability questions about topics like those noted above can be understandably frustrating for a California farmer because we know California has very strict laws governing such areas as child labor, worker protection and pesticide use, just to name a few. California is inarguably one of the most regulated growing areas in the world. That said, consum-

ers are increasingly paying attention to a company’s/industry’s sustainability profile.

To that end, the California Avocado Commission is working to identify the current laws and regulations California avocado growers comply with, which can help California avocado growers demonstrate their commitment to sustainability practices. For example, California has eight state agencies and six federal agencies whose purview is regulatory oversight of agricultural employers and ensuring the occupational safety, health and well-being of California farm workers. In addition, California is the only state in which overtime conditions for agriculture workers align with those of other workers (eight hours per regular work day). Finally, California has four state agencies with regulatory oversight of agricultural practices related to pesticides, fertilizers and dust.

The Commission is compiling this sustainability information to ensure that California avocado growers are recognized for their current environmentally friendly farming and fair employment practices. It will be up to the other countries to address their avocado sustainability practices, but rest assured the Commission will do everything within its power to call out the existing high-quality farming and employment standards of California avocado growers. 🥑