

HAB Update

Nutrition Research Focus Paying Dividends

By Tim Linden

The Hass Avocado Board (HAB), which is in its 11th year of operation, continues to focus its efforts on nutrition research and communicating the healthful benefits of avocados to U.S. consumers.

The Board is the umbrella organization for the various regional groups that make up the volume of avocados sold in the United States. Those groups include the California Avocado Commission, Avocados from Mexico, the Chilean Avocado Importers Association and the Peruvian Avocado Importers Association. According to the U.S. law establishing the marketing order for avocados sold in the United States, each of those individual groups receive 85 percent of the assessments generated on their volume to basically conduct origin-specific marketing programs. HAB operates on the other 15 percent and has focused its attention on nutrition research.

HAB Executive Director Emiliano Escobedo said that research is starting to pay dividends as studies are published and research efforts refined. As of the date of this publication, three nutritional studies have been published and two more should be published in the first quarter of 2014.

Escobedo said the research is suggesting a link between increased avocado consumption and improved health. For example, an epidemiological study that delved deeply into data concerning the eating habits of 17,000 people, found that those people with the greatest avocado consumption had significantly lower weight, lower cholesterol and were generally healthier eaters. The study does not draw a direct link between a specific food and health outcome, but it does strongly suggest that above-average avocado consumption is very consistent with a healthier diet.

Another study, conducted by UCLA researchers, specifically measured the impact eating a half of an avocado had on blood flow. Two groups were studied. One group ate a hamburger while the other group ate the exact same hamburger but this time it included a half of an avocado. The half of avocado added about 100 calories and 12 grams of fat to the meal. One might expect that blood flow to the heart would decrease as that is the typical cardiovascular action after a high fat meal. In fact, the group eating just the hamburger did experience a decrease in blood

flow. The group with the added avocado ingredient maintained normal blood flow.

Escobedo said this research was very interesting and it will be built upon with additional studies looking at the avocado's impact on cardiovascular health.

He added that because of its limited budget, HAB is very careful concerning the projects it funds. A building block approach is very consistent with the Board's goals and criteria. "As we consider funding nutritional

research we are guided by two goals," he said. "First we want it to have a high likelihood of success based on previous research. We are looking for positive outcomes. We recognize that we have to respect the science and if the research is not positive we do understand that."



HAB Nutrition Research Program Director Dr. Nikki Ford

He said secondly the research project needs to have more than just a positive outcome, it needs to be the type of research that is relevant to consumers and will motivate them to eat more avocados.

That of course is one of the major goals of the Hass Avocado Board. Escobedo said increased consumption is the key to the Board's expressed goal of increasing the profitability for growing avocados in all regions that sell their fruit in the United States.

To help on the nutrition end, HAB recently hired Dr. Nikki Ford as the director of the nutrition research program. Dr. Ford will oversee the research and interface with the researchers as well as HAB's marketing agency, which is charged with communicating the successful health story to consumers.



As part of that communication effort, HAB has adopted a new marketing message that it is encouraging the regional groups to adopt as well. "'Love One Today' is our new message," said Escobedo.

He said the marketing strategy is designed to promote the science but also to create an emotional connection with consumers. He said consumers that eat avocados do "love" the fruit. They have a visceral connection with the avocado and HAB wants to connect the healthy messages – contains naturally good fat and is cholesterol free – with that positive attitude to begin with. "We want them to 'Love One Today,'" he repeated.

Operationally, HAB believes it has been very successful in strengthening its rapport with all the member organizations. Legally the Board is made up of seven California avocado growers and five importers representing the various points of origins where avocados sold in the United States come from. For the first many years of operation, there was no effort to connect with the producers from the exporting countries, even though representing that produc-

tion was part of HAB's assignment. "Now we have an ex-officio (non-voting) member from each producing region come to our board meetings and take part in all of the discussions. We have a representative from CAC as well as Chile, Mexico and Peru."

Escobedo said this involvement has created a much more cohesive and inclusive board that has better information on which to base its research project decisions and marketing efforts. At each board meeting, he said the ex-officio members give a country report where they talk about the crop as well the successes and challenges the industry in that specific country faces. "This has been a tremendous help as we sit at meetings and talk about plans moving forward; it is great that we can talk to people with skin in the game and truly get a global perspective."

With the view that information is critical, HAB has embarked on another journey to increase the transparency in the industry. Building on the experience that the California Avocado Commission gained with its informational system, AMRIC (Avocado Marketing Research and Information Center), HAB is creating a similar system with greater global emphasis. "AMRIC is a great success story," he said. "Making it global is a challenge, but we are very, very close to achieving that."

He expects the voluntary system to debut sometime early in 2014. The system will have both supplier and marketer components. Participants will be expected to report only accurate information regarding supplies and sales. "We are currently creating the rules of the game. It is authorized under the law but it can't be misleading," Escobedo said.

Only those who participate will have access to the information generated. Escobedo is hopeful that a critical mass of suppliers and marketers will participate, which will increase the accuracy of the information. He said all indicators point to a continued increased in avocado consumption in the United States and the more information that growers and marketers have can only help in that effort.

Speaking of the U.S. consumption curve, Escobedo said he remains very bullish on the future for two very important and interrelated reasons. In the first place, the Hispanic population in the United States continues to increase. That population is also rapidly growing its per capita income. So you have a population that is growing and has more money and is already sold on the avocado.

Secondly, he said the U.S. population in general is moving toward a more healthy diet, which is another plus for avocados. Though HAB expects avocado consumption in the United States in 2014 to be fairly close to the 1.7 billion pounds consumed in 2013, Escobedo said that is more of a function of the fact that California is expected to have a much smaller crop in 2014. Long term he sees consumption increasing, and topping the 2 billion pound mark fairly quickly. "Maybe in 2016," he predicted. 🥑