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PSHB Outreach Moves Forward

As the concern over the distribution of polyphagous shot hole borer (PSHB) near avocado growing regions increases (see distribution map on page 32), the California Avocado Commission (CAC) partnered over the last few months with the California Association of Pest Control Advisers (CAPCA) to conduct pest control applicator (PCA) training on PSHB and fusarium dieback, the deadly fungus it vectors.

The first workshop was held at the Huntington Library in Pasadena where more than 60 PCAs were able to examine damage caused by PSHB infestation and resulting fusarium dieback. Workshops were also conducted in Ventura and Fallbrook with a combined attendance of 170 PCAs. All three workshops included training on the identification of PSHB and fusarium dieback signs and symptoms, along with a presentation on the biology and genetics of PSHB and a discussion on possible treatment tools. The presenters included University of California - Riverside researchers Dr. Akif Eskalen, Dr. Richard Stouthamer, and Dr. Tim Paine. All three are currently working on PSHB-related projects funded by CAC. A fourth workshop is scheduled for April 24, 2014, at the Rincon Beach Club in Carpinteria. (More information on that event can be found at capcaed.com.)

CAC President Tom Bellamore is also working with California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross to develop a statewide PSHB task force for the coordination of state and federal agency activities and resources. CAC hopes to broaden the dialogue among regulators, environmentalists, commodity groups, and industries impacted by PSHB. Ideally, a high-level and focused discussion will lead to collective agreement on a coordinated strategy for further research, development of mitigation steps, and funding commitments where possible. Plans are underway for an initial meeting in Sacramento in spring.

Uniconazole (Sunny) Field Trials

Based on continued interest from growers, in late 2013 CAC initiated field efficacy trials on the plant growth regulator Uniconazole (Sunny), reported to temporarily stop vegetative shoot growth that could help maintain tree size, especially in high-density plantings. Prior to beginning the field trials, CAC staff met multiple times with representatives from Valent, the manufacturer, to discuss registration costs. Valent determined the studies necessary to support a registration with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) would be around \$2 million, and said they (Valent) would not contribute

financially to the registration due to limited economic return projections based on the relatively small sales market in avocados. Valent did indicate their interest in a Licensing Agreement that would allow CAC to recoup some of the up-front investment for registration requirements based on a percentage of sales should CAC pursue EPA registration. As the next step, the Commission decided to conduct field efficacy trials to determine whether Uniconazole would be a valuable tool for California growers. The field trials are expected to be completed this year at which time the Commission will determine if pursuing an EPA registration is merited.

Food Safety

From the early development of the CAC Food Safety program, the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Committee has focused on establishing a program that addressed potential areas of risk in growing and harvesting avocados, but remained committed to focusing only on areas that were a risk to avocados and not embracing a one-size-fits-all program developed from risk associated with row crops. The California avocado industry has made great progress over the last couple of years in this regard, with 35 percent of avocado acreage earning GAP certifica-

tion under the CAC-GAP program. The majority of certifications were completed through the USDA GAP audit process.

Since the beginning of the year there has been an increase in communications from major retailers regarding their specific food safety certification expectations. Specifically, retailers are increasingly moving toward a Global GAP standard. Global GAP is a more stringent set of requirements for growers, which typically involves much greater record keeping of both on-farm and vendor practices. In an effort to maintain a food safety program that truly mitigates risks associated with avocado production – without incorporating more arduous, unnecessary requirements for growers that ultimately don't improve the safety of the fruit – our industry has repeatedly maintained that the current GAP program is appropriate.

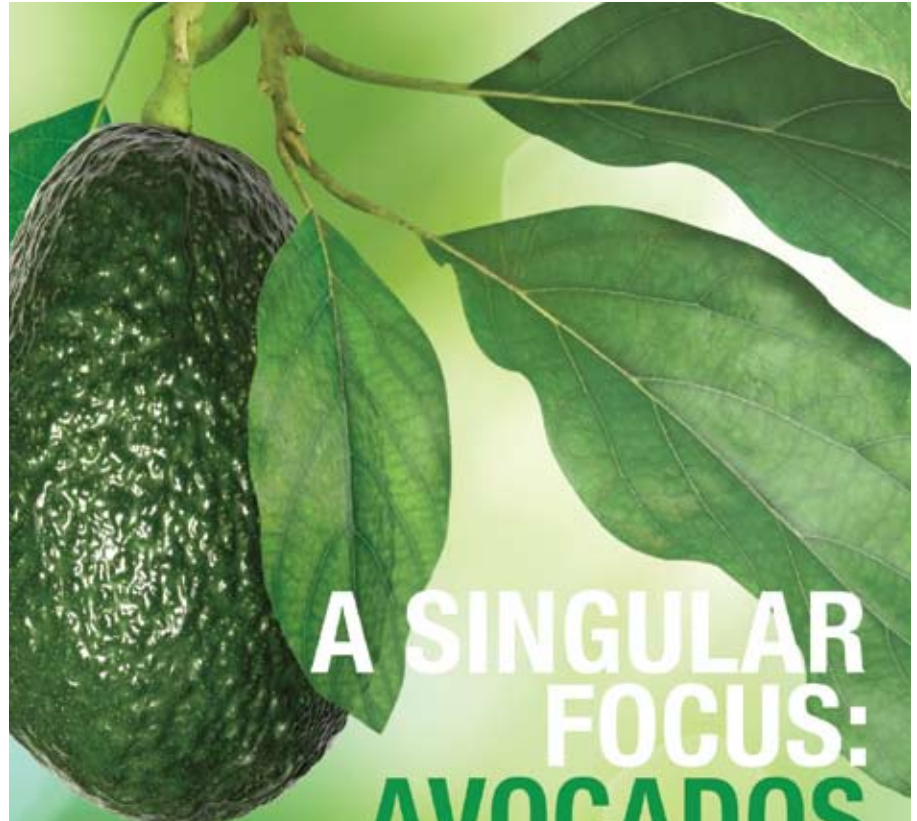
In addition to retail food safety demands, in January of 2011 the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) was passed by Congress charging the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with responsibility for protecting the nation's food supply. This government mandate states that growers must demonstrate compliance with set food safety standards. Recently, however, the FDA announced yet another delay in the deadline for the finalization and implementation of the Rule until August 2015 – making it more than four years since FSMA was signed into law.

So what does all this mean for you as a California avocado grower? Well, simply stated, it's not clear. On one hand, FSMA has been delayed, so growers still have time. Yet, on the other hand, with retailers and foodservice companies continuing to implement food safety certification requirements for their suppliers, and in some instances actually raising the bar, there's a good chance it will become increasingly difficult to find a

buyer for fruit that is not GAP certified. In addition, for growers who have gone through the USDA GAP certification, there is the possibility that more rigorous GAP certification will be required in the future.

CAC, along with the handlers, will continue to work on behalf of

the industry to ensure the food safety requirements for California avocado growers make sense for our industry. Unfortunately, though, as we all know from life's experiences, what makes sense and what ends up happening isn't always one and the same. 🥑



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