



Tom Bellamore

History in the Making

On November 19, at a regularly scheduled meeting of the California Avocado Commission's (CAC's) Board of Directors, something remarkable took place. Two representatives from the Asociación de Productores y Empacadores Exportadores de Aguacate de México (APEAM AC), Ramon Paz and Ron Campbell, presented Dr. Richard Stouthamer of the University of California, Riverside (UCR) with a check for \$50,000, in support of his continuing research on the polyphagous shot hole borer (PSHB). In so doing, they indicated that another contribution of \$50,000 would occur early in 2016. This generous show of support was certainly welcomed by the Commission Board, which has allocated over \$2 million toward the fight against PSHB since the pest was first discovered. Of greater significance, however, and transcending the simple exchange of funds, was the collaboration with an organization that had long been viewed as an adversary. As our APEAM AC guests rose to address the Board, the historic nature of the event was all but palpable. How far we have come.

For decades, avocado-infesting pests were at the center of the California avocado industry's dispute with Mexico over avocado imports. Although Mexico's requests for ac-

cess to the U.S. market pre-date 1994, it was only then that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA-APHIS) began addressing the issue in earnest. The federal rule-making that ensued remains unprecedented, and many of us remember these milestones:

February 1997: APHIS grants Mexico access to 19 northeastern states, with shipping limited to November through February only; only the Mexican state of Michoacán is approved for export to the U.S.

November 2001: Access to an additional 12 northern tier states is granted and the shipping period expands to October 15 through April 15

November 2004: Mexico is granted year-round shipping to all states except California, Florida and Hawaii

February 2007: Mexican avocado imports are permitted to enter California, Florida and Hawaii

February 2015: APHIS issues a proposed rule, which would allow Hass avocado exports from any location in Mexico (not just the state of Michoacán)

If you were growing avocados in California in 1994, it seemed like the sky was falling. Mexico's Hass avocado production in the state of Michoacan alone was sufficient to bury the U.S. producer, and the array

of quarantine pests that could potentially accompany shipments from that country was gravely disconcerting. APHIS was just beginning to implement a risk mitigation methodology known as the systems approach, and confidence in the government — which appeared to favor foreign producers over domestic ones — was low in the wake of North American Free Trade Agreement negotiations.

Back then, you wouldn't have thought it likely that more than 20 years later Mexico would still be trying to gain access to the U.S. market for avocados grown anywhere in their country. The novelty of the systems approach, the variety of pests it sought to address, and the Commission's relentless efforts to ensure science-based decision-making resulted in a protracted regulatory path that has yet to come to an end. Even more unimaginable were the benefits that path yielded for both sides.

Ultimately, USDA exercised an abundance of caution when making regulatory decisions impacting the phytosanitary security of U.S. avocado growers, though perhaps not of its own choosing. Nonetheless, central to the systems approach was the idea of granting access in incremental steps or staging over time. The progression that started with Mexican avocado shipments to



Left to Right: Tom Bellamore (CAC), Dr. Richard Stouthamer (UCR), Ramon Paz (APEAM AC), Ron Campbell (APEAM AC), Doug O'Hara (CAC)

At a recent CAC Board meeting Ramon Paz and Ron Campbell of APEAM AC present UCR's Dr. Stouthamer with a check for \$50,000 in support of his continued research on PSHB

a limited area of the United States for a limited number of months to the present level of access, while implemented for phytosanitary reasons, also lent itself well to the task of market development. As the aggregate supply of avocados began to rise in the United States, promotional efforts undertaken by APEAM AC built new demand, particularly in distant East Coast markets such as New York, where media purchases are expensive. By targeting new avocado users, APEAM AC did some heavy lifting to expand the avocado category in the United States at a pace that helped preserve market values.

Fast forward to 2016 when Mexican avocado imports to this country could reach two billion pounds, the Food Safety Modernization Act becomes law and the most looming pest threat for avocados is the PSHB. On the marketing side, there is now a well-established record of discipline

with respect to weekly shipments to the U.S. market by Mexico that, while at times far from perfect, is evidence of mutual respect and collaboration between avocado interests in both countries. Given the sheer volume Mexico is capable of sending our way, even the most skeptical among us would have to admit that the economic impacts from their presence in the U.S. market could have been far worse.

Food safety concerns present another area for collaboration for obvious reasons. Though efforts here have been generally out of view, APEAM AC and CAC have been working together for quite some time to manage food safety risks stemming from bacterial contamination. A food safety incident potentially involving avocados would bring negative economic consequences for all, without regard to product origin, and sharing of information is critical to both or-

ganizations.

So it goes with PSHB. This pest or its closely related cousins can already be found in various avocado-growing regions around the world, proving that it, too, knows no boundaries. With its action at the Commission Board meeting, APEAM AC has demonstrated a willingness to once again be a collaborative partner with the California avocado industry. Despite our history of being at odds over pests, we have set the past behind us, and none too soon. The diversification of resources brought to bear in the fight against PSHB is a plus for California avocado growers, and may help keep PSHB from becoming rampant in Mexico. Perhaps, just perhaps, the historic event in the CAC boardroom foretells the beginning of other strategic collaborations of which few would dream – only time will tell. 🥑