

Adjusting to New Circumstances



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I am relatively sure we are all tired of hearing about the coronavirus and shutdowns by now. The avocado industry has certainly been turned upside down for the past two months. Everything looked so promising back in February and early March. Amazing how fragile things can be. As I write this the week before Memorial Day, the avocado market has stayed remarkably viable, at least if your fruit had size.

With the virtually overnight shutdown of the foodservice industry, the California Avocado Commission (CAC) made a significant pivot in the way we have been promoting avocados. By early April, the market dynamics made it clear that we had to make a larger push in the digital and social platforms to promote avocado consumption at home. By April 10, the CAC team had set new priorities and allocated budgets to effectively change the tone of our marketing effort. It should be said that just a few years ago this would not have been possible. With so much of the messaging we do today from a digital platform, it is fairly easy to make this type of adjustment. If we were still in the days of print media, changes would have needed to come months in advance.

Foodservice is now starting to come back, but I think it will be months before we are back to normal. Our main

job now is marketing this crop with a smaller weekly demand and a compressed time frame. Weather has thus far cooperated, but there may be some warm weather ahead that will pressure inland growers to harvest before the optimal time.

The CAC staff has mostly been working from home. We have all been using video and telephonic conferencing with mostly good results. Our May board meeting will be a video conference for the first time. It should be interesting, to say the least.

On the farm, we are seeing set for next year and getting ready to do thrip sprays. After two years of decent rains (better in the south than in the north, but still not bad) the trees are looking great, with new leaves seemingly larger than they have been for some time. I am hearing various observations about the set for 2021, from very good to light. I am hoping for mostly good, as it would greatly benefit our industry to have strong consecutive crops.

This past week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued guidelines for Direct Payments to Specialty Crop growers. While avocados are mentioned as a qualifying crop, I cannot see any instance in which an avocado grower would qualify for any of the three categories under which pay-

ments would be made. There may be a few exceptions, but the USDA must not have had any input from most specialty crops. This is most disappointing to our industry and indicative of what happens when regulations are written in a vacuum. As government typically does when rushed, it applies a one-size-fits-all system without doing the homework to make the appropriate regulations for each crop. Every category has a cutoff of April 15. Most of the damage to the avocado markets will happen well after that date. In fact, the problems are really going to arise as we market our fruit going into the summer months, with less than normal demand and a compressed time frame to harvest our crop. We can see this illustrated by the soft demand for 70s and 84s.

You will see that Tom Bellamore has a column that is positive and mostly advises us to be grateful for what we have. This is true, especially as other produce crops are being affected much worse than avocados. I recently read an article stating that avocados are one of the big winners in this deal. I guess we won't know for a while; it doesn't really feel like it to me.

I am wishing all growers have a positive year and a strong set for the coming year. May all your Coronas come in a six pack! 🥑