

By Ken Melban
Vice President Industry Affairs

Commission Meets with Representative Brownley on Labor & Power

In early November, California Avocado Commission (CAC) representatives met with Congresswoman Julia Brownley (D-CA 26th District) to reiterate the need for the U.S. Congress to secure immigration reforms that would remedy the labor challenges California avocado farmers are facing. The Commission stressed its support for the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, which has now passed the House of Representatives and is at the Senate. Rep. Brownley understands the ongoing challenges agriculture is facing for a reliable, skilled labor force and voted in support of the Act.

The discussion quickly turned to the Public Safety Power Shutoffs (PSPS) growers had been experiencing. According to the utility companies, when they determine there are “extreme and potentially dangerous weather conditions” they will initiate a PSPS event and “turn off power in high fire risk areas to reduce the threat of wildfires.” Factors that are used to determine whether a PSPS is warranted include wind speed, humidity and temperature. The Commission hosted a meeting with Southern California Edison (SCE) last year to discuss SCE’s plan to utilize PSPS. Now that growers have experienced multiple PSPS events, the discussion with Rep. Brownley centered on specific concerns. CAC representatives com-



municated how the loss of power not only threatened crops but also meant growers had no ability to fight fires that threaten their property or provide water to firefighting personnel for fire suppression. In addition, there is concern that a recent fire in Ventura County that did burn avocado groves started due to a power surge in the lines when power was restored after a PSPS.

Within days of hearing our concerns, Rep. Brownley met with the president of SCE. As of this writing, a meeting has been set up with Commission representatives and senior SCE officials to discuss the impacts the PSPS are having on farmers and explore potential so-

lutions. Of course, no one will ever argue against efforts to protect public safety, but it is imperative SCE and the other utility companies remain open to input on how their programs are impacting their customers and assess whether better options can be developed.

Sustainability

The Commission recently hosted two grower focus groups concerning sustainability. The purpose was to provide some information on what sustainability means and begin to assess the California avocado industry in terms of our sustainability practices. Most farmers would say sustainability means,

“my business can be sustained for many years to come.” And of course, without a sustained farming operation any other discussion of sustainability becomes moot. However, the discussion of sustainable agricultural production practices focuses on the following three questions:

- Are the practices environmentally sound?
- Are the practices socially equitable?
- Are the practices economically viable?

More buyers are asking for information on the sustainability practices of the suppliers they source from, including information on greenhouse gas emissions; fertilizer and pesticide applications; and child labor use and labor rights. Last year, the Commission conducted a project to identify the federal and state laws that you, as a California producer, must follow. We know that California is one of the most regulated states to conduct business in and wanted to make sure growers are getting credit for what they are already doing. We need to learn more about the industry’s farming practices and determine what, if any, changes could improve our sustainability profile. And yes, that includes improving your bottom line too.

TSAWR in San Diego County

The Transitional Special Agricultural Water Rate (TSAWR) is a program implemented more than 10 years ago by the San Diego County Water Authority (CWA) to provide a reduced rate for agricultural customers within the San Diego County Water Authority’s service area (San Diego County). The program is based on customers agreeing to a reduced level of service and reliability. This has resulted in tremendous savings for growers who have participated; in some instances, growers are only paying about one-third of the rates paid by municipal and industrial customers. The

Commission has worked closely with the CWA since the creation of the program and just recently advocated for the CWA to make the program permanent. In a great first step toward that goal, the CWA unanimously voted in November to direct staff to develop a new and permanent Special Agricultural Water Rate program to replace the TSAWR. In addition, the plan is to open up the pro-

gram to new participants. The current TSAWR will expire at the end of 2020, and it is expected the CWA will take final action by mid-2020. Kudos to the San Diego County Farm Bureau for its help on this important effort. The Commission will continue to stay engaged with the CWA on the development and codifying of this program. 🥑



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Contact our field representatives to learn more
Jessica Hunter, jessica@delreyavocado.com
Gerardo Huerta, gerardo@delreyavocado.com
Wayne Brydon, wayne@delreyavocado.com
Mario Martinez, mariola@delreyavocado.com
Frank Alegria, frank@delreyavocado.com

For GAP certification assistance please contact:
Hillary DeCarl, hillary@delreyavocado.com



Grower | Packer | Importer
California Conventional and Organic Avocados
(760) 728-8325 delreyavocado.com
1260 S. Main Street, Fallbrook, CA 92028