

“Success Came Because I Never Saw Obstacles”

~ Dr. Frieda Rapoport Caplan



Jeff Oberman

I'm honored to lead the dedicated team at the California Avocado Commission. During my first three months on the job, I've enjoyed the opportunity to meet growers and stakeholders throughout the supply chain, gaining valuable insight on their unique backgrounds, operations and expectations concerning my role and direction for the Commission. My travels have included visits to all five districts, in addition to the California Avocado Society's Annual Meeting in Pauma Valley. I also attended the International Fresh Produce Association Global Produce Show in Orlando, Florida, where I interacted with growers, retailers and other players in the avocado industry. My takeaway from the California visits was that there are competing opinions concerning the current 'state of the industry' and outlook for the future. Colleagues of mine in the 'Commission World' sometimes describe these visits as the 'Airing of Grievances Tour'. However, I have found this to be a 'Listen and Innovate for the Future' experience.

I was reminded at the outset of the CAS Annual Meeting by their president that they represent a voluntary dues-based organization. At the Commission, we are charged with optimizing the growers' return on assessment dollars. It is my 20+ years of service experience at United Fresh, a voluntary



Charley Wolk, Jeff Oberman and Leo McGuire

dues-based association, that will help inform the direction I take to help drive value for California avocado growers. Though we operate with the aid of a mandated budget, I'm focused on providing the same return on investment that drives participation in voluntary organizations. Every day! I greatly appreciate the input I received as we set the course for navigating the coming 2023 season.

The excitement generated by all these in-person gatherings had a different feel, as in many cases it has been close to three years since we have been able to do that. This resulted in a very well-attended IFPA (formerly PMA)

Show in Orlando that had near-record attendance. The Commission was rewarded with a prime location for our booth because of our 50 years of participation in the exposition. And that's important because this show provides a great venue to drive the California avocados' premium value positioning to retail customers, industry stakeholders and peers. The CAC team met with key customers, handlers and growers. We also gained insights from various exporters into the U.S. market by attending their respective nation's meetings held at the show.

Reflecting on these travels presents us with the ability to determine



Jeff Oberman with Samee and Ralph Foster

how we can best seize the many opportunities before us and prioritize our activities to reach our 2023 goals. Many have shared that California avocado growers potentially face a challenging year like none other. That said, it goes back to the core mission of the Commission – maximizing California avocado grower viability in today’s environment. To accomplish this task, we have put forth a plan that will increase efforts at trade (point of sale) as well as continued messaging to ensure the brand occupies an exclusive position in the minds of consumers as well as retailers and foodservice operators. An analysis of the feedback I received on industry issues led to three topics rising to the top of the list: a renewal of the focus on varieties; the need to address key issues that impact grower profitability; and the desire to research the value of sustainability programs.

Concerning varietal work, during 2023 the Commission will continue education programs that illustrate the value of legacy, current and new varieties to growers. We also will be working with buyers to explore promotional opportunities at strategic points within our marketing season for specific varieties.

The top challenges for California

avocado grower profitability are clearly water and labor. We plan to seek partners for collaboration on water and labor issues beyond produce and traditional ag to include construction, landscape management and increased engagement with local, regional and national boards.

In a similar vein, we are reaching out to ag industry sectors beyond produce for insights on their sustainability program successes that can help *tell our story* to customers, consumers and government officials, and identify potential cost savings that create a win-win scenario. I’m a firm believer in collaboration to achieve goals, and we are going to utilize this approach to maximize the effectiveness of our efforts versus a ‘go it alone’ mantra.

Yep – there is a lot on our plate for the coming year and some may say the headwinds are strong and challenges face our sector from every direction. To counter this mindset, I’m going to challenge our team and grower stakeholders to channel the late Dr. Frieda Rapoport Caplan who shared this sage advice in the 2015 documentary film “Fear No Fruit” about her life as a produce industry trailblazer: **“Success came because I never saw obstacles.”** 🥑



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