

# Tom Bellamore Rides into the Sunset After an Impressive Career

By Tim Linden

**W**hen Tom Bellamore joined the staff of the California Avocado Commission in the early 1990s, he was perfectly positioned to utilize the education, the experience, and skill sets he had developed through education, work and life experiences.

He was hired as vice president of government affairs and more than 27 years later is retiring after leading the Commission as its president since 2009. Bellamore has been materially involved in what has been a very eventful three decades of change for California avocado growers, and he needed all his experiences and talents to navigate the landscape.

Charley Wolk, who has been a board member of the Commission for many different terms during its 40+ years of existence, noted that he has served each of the Commission's four presidents during that period and knew them all well. He believes Bellamore did an excellent job during his CAC career and points to his personality as perhaps the key attribute that informed his success during his tenure. "One of his traits that served him well was his desire to run away from the limelight. His M.O., his leadership style... was not to jump up and make a point before he was ready. He wanted to consider every issue and give guidance where he could. He has a very humble attitude."

Wolk said this was far different from previous CAC presidents, but it clearly worked for Bellamore and helped him get through some very thorny situations over the years. "His work ethic was unmatched. He had a thoroughness to everything he did. He certainly didn't shoot from the hip. He had the skill and ability to bring people together."

While Wolk is very appreciative of Bellamore's style, he did say tooting your own horn is sometimes necessary too, but the retiring president wouldn't do it. "Sometimes you do have to let the growers know what has been accomplished. I remember a grower once saying how lucky the industry was to get so much good press in magazines like *Good Housekeeping*. I'd shake my head," Wolk recalls. "That didn't just happen. Tom and his staff did that."

That comment reminded Wolk of another enduring trait that Bellamore has. "Tom's concern for his employees was so sincere. I mean really sincere."

Ron Campbell, who represents Mexico's avocado growers (APEAM) as well as the importers (MAHIA), was an adversary of Bellamore's in the early years and a collaborator after Mexico gained access to the market. "The California avocado growers never appreciated how difficult it was to keep Mexico out of the market. Tom was a formidable opponent to say the least. I don't think growers understood how hard he fought. It took us (Mexico) a long time to gain full access."

Like Wolk, Campbell said some of that lack of awareness by the growers is tied to Bellamore's personality of taking a back seat and avoiding the spotlight. But he said that was the perfect approach in dealing with the Mexican industry and officials. "Tom was a gentleman, smart, professional and humble. He always stayed humble and that is the approach that works very well with the Mexicans. They do not respond well to a lot of yelling and screaming."

Once Mexico did gain full access to the market, Campbell said the relationship between Mexico and U.S. producers shifted as the focus was on building the market. While there was tension, he said CAC under Bellamore and Mexico's promotional organization, along with the Hass Avocado Board, did work collaboratively to build the market and increase consumption. He noted that the farmgate value for California growers has grown over the years, proving in his estimation that a rising tide does lift all boats. "Each of the associations has done an excellent job including CAC. As Tom retires, he can hold his head up high. He did a great job representing his industry and he is leaving his industry in good shape. The value of research and promotion programs has been proven."

True to his nature, Bellamore would not be interviewed for this story. He believes he merely "did his job" for the past 27 years and others can determine how well he accomplished that.

Tom Bellamore grew up in New Jersey in the 1950s when it was more rural than what comes to mind today. He was at-

tracted to the open spaces, bugs and biology. He began his college career as a biology and pre-med student at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, but soon joined a friend who was attending college in Alaska.

Bellamore fell in love with the place, graduated from the University of Alaska and took a position as a biologist with the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory in the most northern section of Alaska. He stayed in Alaska for 13 years, also working for the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, and the Alaska Seafood Institute. His final stop in Alaska introduced him to commodity marketing, which remained a focus of his career for close to four decades.

In 1985, Bellamore moved to Seattle to take a position with the Seafood Marketing Institute, spending a lot of time working on export programs. He also had stints in programs representing cotton, and dry peas and lentils. That final position was in Idaho, which introduced him to his California-born wife, Melanie. It was her desire to get back to her home state that led Bellamore to pursue an opening at CAC.

It was his expertise in both commodity marketing and biology that made him a perfect fit for CAC in the mid-1990s. At that time, the Commission was very engaged in the effort to protect its industry and prevent the importation of avocados from Mexico because of the risk of pests. Bellamore spent countless hours discussing bugs and their impact on the industry and writing position papers on the subject.

Wolk said it was through the efforts of CAC that the industry was able to achieve a stair-step approach to the opening of the U.S. market to Mexican avocados. That deliberate approach allowed the pest impact to be measured, and also allowed the collective avocado industry to build demand as supplies increased.

While employed by CAC, Bellamore continued his education, earning a master's in business administration and a law degree. That advanced education served both Bellamore and CAC well as his duties expanded and he eventually became president of the Commission.

As the new president, Bellamore downsized the staff and greatly reduced expenses, which was the major point of contention with the previous administration. Today, CAC is a lean organization and the budgeting process is very transparent.



Under Bellamore's leadership, the California avocado industry has enjoyed some of its best years as the field price has been trending upward and California has successfully positioned itself as the premium avocado in the marketplace. Years ago, Bellamore realized, and told growers, that Mexico's production would continue to increase. At one annual meeting, he said a two-billion-pound U.S. market was not far off in the future. The United States is now consuming close to three billion pounds of avocados per year and California has become a niche player, but an important one. California continues to lead the nation in avocado consumption, and it is where most of the state's production is consumed...at a premium price.

California avocado growers approved a continuing marketing order referendum in 2021 ensuring that the Commission will exist for at least another five years. Wolk said Bellamore was adamant about seeing the industry through that referendum. "He took it very personally. If the referendum would have failed, he thought it would be because of him. He was fearful of that and wanted to see it through."

The referendum did pass and Wolk said Bellamore is leaving the industry in very good shape. The premium positioning and focusing on West Coast sales has proven to be prescient. Farmgate price has improved, and the California avocado industry has a bright future, according to Wolk. "I believe we are going to have some 500 to 600-million-pound crops in the not-so-distant future and we are going to be able to sell that."

Wolk also noted that he is on a two-year waiting list to buy more avocado trees to plant in California. "That wouldn't be happening, if it wasn't a strong industry." 🥑