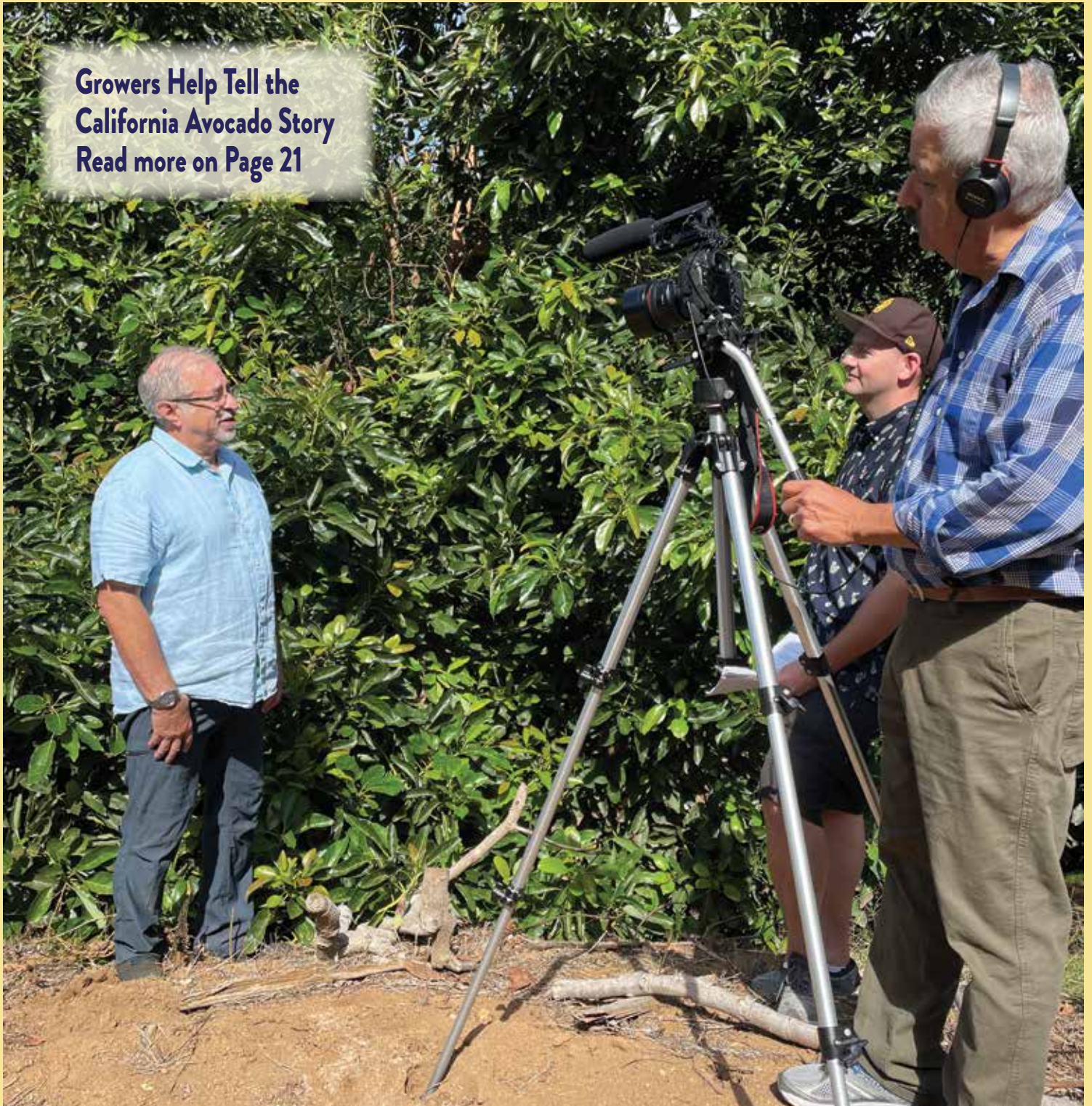


From the **Grove**

Spring 2023

The Latest News from the California Avocado Industry

**Growers Help Tell the
California Avocado Story
Read more on Page 21**





California Avocados



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Grower Profile

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Camlam Farms
Ventura County, CA



From the Grove

Volume 13, Number 1

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The articles, opinions and advertisements presented in this magazine are designed to offer information and provoke thought. Inclusion in this publication does not presume an endorsement or recommendation by the California Avocado Commission for any particular product or cultural practice.

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Volume 13, Number 1 Spring 2023

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Hope Springs Eternal

“Hope springs eternal” is a phrase that comes to mind as we kick off this year’s 2023 California season. Meeting with stakeholders recently I mentioned how I was struck by all the articles in the trade press leading up to the Big Game. Almost every article lent itself to boasting about the increased availability for import volume, yet handlers and the reporters were seemingly focused on the excitement for the California fruit to enter the marketplace. This is a true testament to the premium quality and value for customers and consumers that California fruit delivers.

I recently sat with Jan DeLyser on one of her last days before her retirement and echoed my thoughts on these articles and the ‘surprise’ that these articles focused on California fruit. She stopped me to proclaim – “It’s not a surprise, we at the Commission have worked for years to ensure that message is delivered year in and year out!”

Jan, point made. Thank you for all your service, and know that your legacy will remain as we move forward as a team continuing to promote the premium brand positioning for California Avocados and improving grower sustainability.

The Commission team has been active during this start to the season with meetings in growing districts to gain feedback from stakeholders. We

also hosted a well-attended grower field day at Pine Tree Ranch in Santa Paula. During my remarks at Pine Tree Ranch, I was asked if I can guarantee a \$5 return to the grower...and I countered that “We’ll do our best — however, what did everyone think about the rain and snow that we’ve delivered this winter?!” OK, we can’t take credit for the weather,

“Looking ahead there are great opportunities for the coming season ... We are seeing FOB prices on the rise, and some handlers have provided feedback concerning the good premium California fruit is receiving.”

but we are working hard on key grower issues such as best practices for Phytophthora control, pruning strategies, how best to navigate freeze/frost, and mapping the success of various root stocks depending on the growing district and conditions.

In my first column, I discussed the hot topic of how the Commission can potentially expand promotional opportunities for multiple varieties. As we



Jeff Oberman

enter the 2023 season, we are focused on variety opportunities with our retail customers and relaying how some late-season varieties could help extend the season. We also are mindful of the market share these new varieties make up in total when balancing the spend and allocating our efforts within our marketing programs.

At the last Commission board meeting, outgoing Vice President Marketing Jan DeLyser was challenged that we focus a lot of effort promoting Hass versus other varieties. Her answer will stick with me forever. She said: “We do not promote Hass, we promote CALIFORNIA AVOCADOS!” Thanks again Jan, for the spot-on reminder.

Looking ahead there are great opportunities for the coming season. Already the Commission is welcoming a new vice president of Marketing (p. 12) who will help maintain our efforts in promoting your fruit and look strategically into the future to maximize our efforts in a new landscape. Despite 2022 Q4 and early 2023 Q1 pricing, we are seeing FOB prices on the rise, and some handlers have provided feedback concerning the good premium California fruit is receiving. So, we will focus on what is within our control at the Commission and on delivering value to the stakeholders to make this another strong California season. Let’s go! 🍌



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By Ken Melban
Vice President of Industry Affairs & Operations

Commission Considers Industry Sustainability Certification

Interest in sustainability continues to grow with key California avocado retailers and consumers. Sustainability assesses the impacts, both positive and negative, the production of a product has on the planet and people. In a past California Avocado Commission funded study, more than 100 laws and regulations were identified that California avocado growers comply with in areas such as worker health, safety and wages, along with environmental protections. The legal standards in California provide some of the highest, if not the highest, standards for growing avocados in the world.

Unfortunately, the high standards farmers maintain here in California are not widely known. Furthermore, in some instances, practices used in other parts of the world have negatively influenced perceptions of California farming practices. A blatant example of this is child labor. California has significant protections against child labor, yet sustainability questionnaires from major retailers continue to ask questions about the use of child labor in Califor-

nia production.

This disconnect makes a strong case for the Commission proactively sharing the California avocado industry's sustainability story. A story that demonstrates our growers are the original environmentalists. That illustrates how the legacy of your farm is completely, and inextricably, linked to the protections of the land you farm and the people you employ — without either of which your future is nonexistent.

The nutritional and health benefits of California avocados are broadly understood by our target consumers. It's a fact — California avocados are healthy. But the value of purchasing and consuming a California avocado doesn't stop there, in fact that's just the beginning. The California avocado industry provides many other benefits to the local community and surrounding environment. Jobs are created, carbon is sequestered, and green space is preserved by the California avocado industry, just to name a few.

We have a tremendous opportunity to strengthen the California avo-

cado brand appeal by highlighting these non-health benefits. Consumers should not only feel good about purchasing California avocados for their wellbeing, but also for the benefits each California avocado purchase provides to the communities they are grown in and the planet they are grown on.

Demonstrating our sustainability practices gives us the opportunity to tell our story in a way that supports increased loyalty for buying the “locally produced” California avocado supply. And it is a message that will resonate beyond our consumers. By investing in sustainability messaging, we will have new opportunities to educate elected officials, agency personnel, influencers, and maybe even some environmentalists, on the peripheral benefits California avocado farming provides to California.

NO NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL

Recently, Commission representatives met with Sonoma County Winegrape Commission staff and members

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to gain a better understanding of their very successful sustainability program. Launched in 2014, with the “bold commitment – to become the most sustainable winegrowing region in the world,” they have achieved certified sustainability on 99% of their 60,000 acres through a third-party program. Quite impressive.

Those visits provided us with a clear understanding of the opportunity before us and how to move forward. Accordingly, we are working with a third-party program to identify the many Beneficial Management Practices (BMPs) within the California avocado industry and develop a certification process. Based on our previous work we have outlined a series of avocado growing features and their benefits to the public and community. These features include:

- Environmentally Friendly Farming Practices such as no till, erosion control, water conservation and regulatory program participation
- Ensuring Worker Well Being efforts including compliance with state and federal regulations, overtime pay, breaks, field sanitation, personal protective equipment and health and safety training
- Contributing to Healthy Communities initiatives including air quality and climate benefits, orchards as fire breaks and open space
- Maintaining Economic Viability

We are now in the beginning stages of working with a third-party sustainability program to tailor a program that works for California avocados. Once a program is established, the third-party certification program will assist growers in documenting and certifying their sustainable practices. Yes, there will be a cost, but in talking with Sonoma growers it typically runs from around \$500-\$1000.

DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATION PROGRAM FOR CALIFORNIA AVOCADOS

Environment: Evaluate BMPs in use to address environmental effects of avocado farms including maintaining water quality, conserving water, chemicals used and IPM/cultural measures used, chemical storage, mix and load and application measures, soil conservation/erosion control, habitats and existing regulatory programs and other features as needed. A set of BMPs would be completed along with a farm plan template to document practices on each site and identify needed BMPs. Growers will be involved in completing this step.

Workforce and Community: The third-party auditor uses a relatively simple but comprehensive template for documenting labor practices and benefits to workers and communities. This template can be modified to appropriately reflect the California avocado industry.

Sustainable Business Practices: A template for sustainable business practices also is part of the certification. This template will be reviewed with individual growers and adjusted as needed.

Climate: In addition, the third-party auditor can conduct separate climate certification called the Climate Adaptation Certification, which could be included with the program or offered as an option to interested growers. It uses sophisticated modeling to document and quantify greenhouse gas emissions and carbon sequestration. Growers in Sonoma have been very supportive of this certification as it allows flexibility

in land management and sound science to reach climate goals.

Certification: Typically, the certification provides a review of the farm plan, BMPs currently in use and those that will be added and a quick visit to the farm. The certification is a collaborative process using independent auditors. Each site is recertified every five years.

Logo and Marketing: The certifier provides a logo for marketing, labeling and other uses to all operations with up-to-date certifications through a no cost license agreement. In Sonoma, they also have metal enameled certification signs that growers purchase and proudly display on their fence or other location.

For those of you who remember the rollout of the Commission’s food safety program in 2011-12, you are likely thinking, “here we go again.” Well, to some degree, yes. Much of this is similar in terms of making sure you get credit for what you are already doing in the grove.

However, sustainability certification is much more than going through and checking boxes. This is our opportunity to ensure the California avocado industry puts its best foot forward in educating buyers, consumers, future consumers, politicians, influencers, and others on just how much California avocado farming is contributing to California’s future sustainability. Regardless of your opinion on sustainability, our consumers increasingly care. We can no longer rely on others to tell our story.

The time is now for California avocados to build and then tell our sustainability story – California avocado purchases are healthy for you, support the community you live in, and improve the planet you live on. 🍷



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Nielsen Brand Effect Study Helps CAC Direct Consumer Advertising

During the 2022 California avocado season, the California Avocado Commission conducted a research study to evaluate consumer reactions to the advertising campaign and individual ad executions. Conducted by The Nielsen Company, LLC, the 2022 California Avocado Brand Effect Study showed that exposure to the California avocado advertising campaign generated significant lifts in brand awareness, both on an unaided and aided basis.

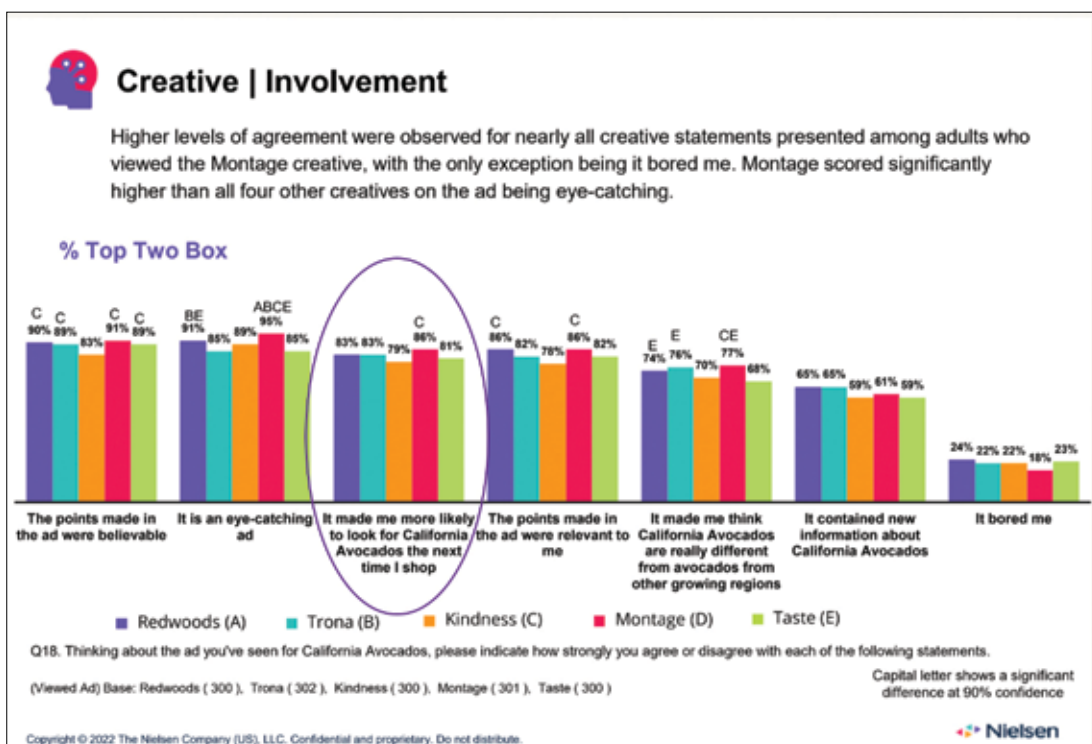
Data collection for the Brand Effect Study took place during the California avocado season from March 18 through August 2, 2022. More than 1,500 adults ages 18-54 who had purchased avocados in the prior month were interviewed via an online survey. These avocado shoppers were from Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington. Digital “tags” were placed on California avocado ads to identify which shoppers had seen the ads and which had not. About half the respondents were assigned to the control group; these consumers did not have an opportunity to see a California avocado online ad. The other roughly half of the respondents were identified as those exposed to a California avocado online ad.

Key Learnings from the Study

Nearly 9-in-10 of those exposed to a California avocado online ad found California as a growing region for avocados to be favorable. These consumers said they would recommend California-grown avocados, and they perceive that California grows premium quality avocados. Importantly, consumers exposed to a California avocado ad showed an intent to purchase them in the future. About 80% of respondents agreed the ads “made me more likely to look for California avocados the next time I shop.” (Agreement ranged from 79% to 86% depending on the ad execution.)

About half of the exposed respondents said they prefer avocados grown in California, which was significantly higher than the control group who had not seen an ad. This difference was mainly driven by females and those in the 35-44 age range.

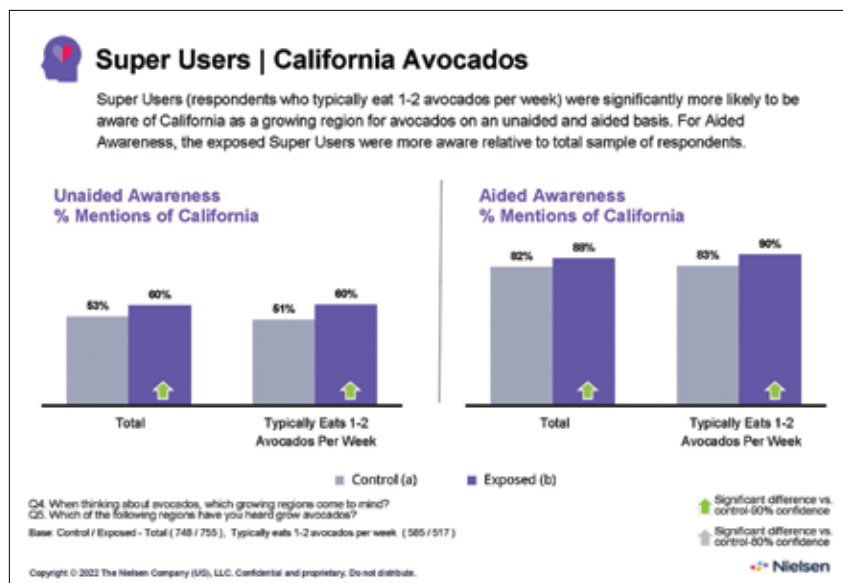
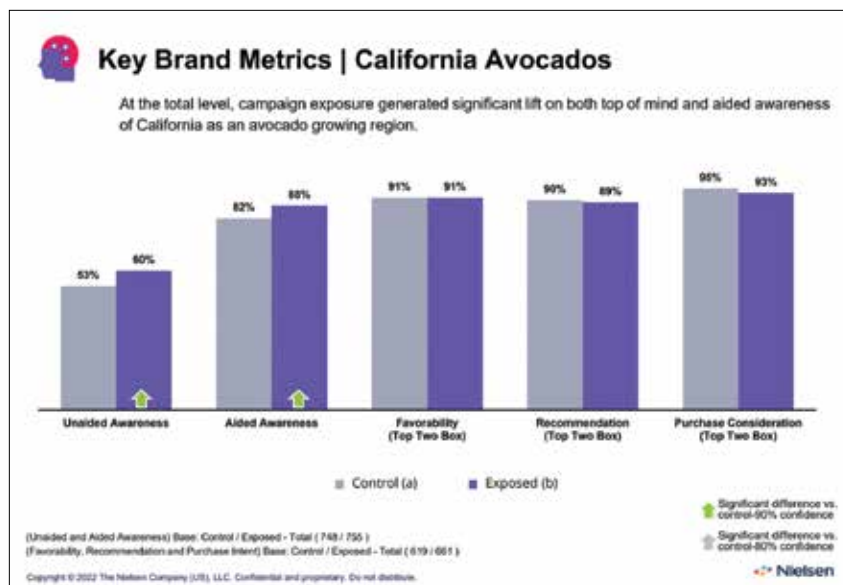
The research analyzed how the ads performed on different digital channels. Tremor Media was the best performing network of sites, as exposure to the advertising drove significant lift across metrics such as unaided awareness, aided awareness and premium perception. Ad exposure also showed a directional lift for favorability. The Commission marketing team



uses study learnings to guide future advertising and media programs and confirmed that Tremor Media is included in the CAC 2023 media plan again.

The study evaluated different creative ad executions and the “montage” ad, which can be viewed at <https://bit.ly/cacmontage>, performed best overall. Avocado super users (consumers who eat 1 to 2 avocados per week) also were evaluated and overall their responses were even more favorable than those consumers who eat fewer avocados. This group is an important part of the “Premium Californians” who are the California avocado target consumers.

This Nielsen Brand Effect study showed that exposure to the 2022 California avocado ad campaign influenced positive perceptions of the brand and encouraged intent to purchase California avocados. Understanding consumer reactions to California avocado advertising and their perceptions of the brand helps the Commission optimize its consumer advertising program. 🥑



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To contact a CAC representative, please visit:
CaliforniaAvocadoGrowers.com/Commission/your-representatives

Food Industry Pro Takes Over Marketing Role

The California Avocado Commission hired food industry veteran Terry Splane to be the organization's new vice president of marketing, effective March 13, 2023.

Splane fills the role vacated by Jan DeLyser, who retired in mid-February after 25 years with CAC. Splane has had more than 30 years of sales and marketing experience in the foodservice and retail channels, most recently as head of partner success & strategy for Impossible Foods.

"We are very happy to have Terry Splane join the team and lead the Commission's marketing strategy and activities," said California Avocado Commission President Jeff Oberman. "Terry's deep experience in the fresh food industry and comprehension of multiple distribution channels including retail, club and foodservice, as well as his leadership in strategy, branding, advertising and public relations, align very well with our marketing team's needs."

Oberman continued: "In addition to Terry's demonstrated marketing proficiency, his industry leadership and mentorship are reasons that we're confident he will be a great fit with the California Avocado Commission. He will be leading a dedicated team of marketers and building upon our legacy of marketing innovation in the exciting avocado category."

Splane grew up in the Pacific Northwest and recalls spending many summers on the family farm in Pullman, which is in East Washington farm country. "I spent a good bit of time on the farm when I was younger helping my uncle harvest the crops, which included wheat, barley and peas," he said. "I look forward to supporting and helping California farmers market their avocados."

In fact, he said it was his love of avocados that attracted him to the CAC position. "First and foremost, I wanted to be involved marketing a product I love," he said.

After graduating from Washington State University in 1984, Splane started his career with Dart Container Corporation, which gave him solid experience in sales, including export, as well as research and analysis. He also was introduced to the world of marketing when he was promoted to the Ft. Lauderdale office in Florida to help develop the market for the company's packaging innovations. He stayed there for four years.

From the Southeast, he moved to the Northeast to take a director of marketing position with The Chinet Company, well known for its paper plates but Splane said the product line is much deeper than that. After six years, he jumped solidly into the food industry with a six-year stint at McCormick & Co., the leader in the retail spice world. That position introduced him to the geographic middle of the Eastern Seaboard as the company is based near Baltimore, MD.



Terry and Traci Splane with their blended family on a family trip.

A further dive into the foodservice business awaited Splane when he joined Ventura Foods, a massive company with dozens of retail and foodservice brands. As vice president of marketing, Splane mostly worked on the foodservice side of the business during his 13-year tenure with the Southern California-based company. The position also allowed him to move back to the West Coast, with California's Orange County serving as his home base ever since.

Splane's most recent position was with Impossible Foods, where he also began as director of marketing about five years ago and then developed the Partner Success and Strategy Department as the functional head. In those five years, he helped the company grow from a startup disruptive brand to the leading manufacturer in the Plant Based Meat category in both Retail and Foodservice.

Splane and his wife, Traci, live in Anaheim Hills, and have a blended family of three adult children. Brandon Splane lives in San Francisco and works for Anova Culinary, which provides smart cooking tools for the home. Cody Splane preceded his father into the produce industry as he works on the marketing team with Zespri International, the world's largest marketer of kiwifruit. Daughter Alex Jones also is in marketing for Mountain Land Design in Salt Lake City.

Terry and Traci love to combine hiking and traveling, often taking short trips to hiking paradises such as Zion National Park, the Sedona area in Arizona, and Joshua Tree National Park in the California desert. They also like their quick-hitter family trips to Mexico. Last year, the family went to Todos Santos on the Baja Peninsula, and this spring they are heading to Sayulita, near Puerto Vallarta on the west coast of Mexico's mainland. 🥑

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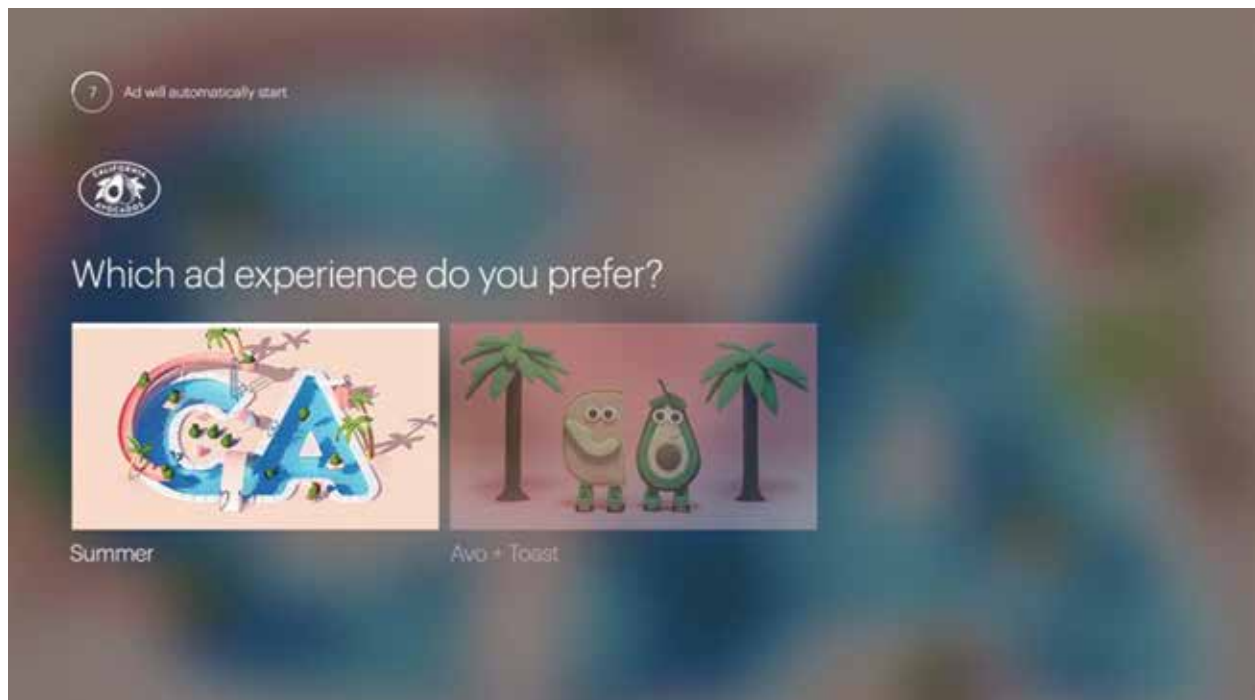


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The Commission will continue “the best avocados have California in them” advertising campaign and showcase the ads on popular digital streaming channels such as Hulu.

2023 Consumer Media Aims to Engage, Inform and Entertain Targeted Consumers

To keep the California Avocados brand top-of-mind with consumers, the California Avocado Commission’s marketing team crafts an integrated consumer media plan comprised of year-round social media and search advertising, focused March - August consumer media campaigns and customer-specific programs aligned with the fruit’s availability.

The Commission’s consumer media program targets “Premium Californians” – those avocado shoppers in California and the West who are willing to pay more for premium brands, as well as avocado “super users,” to encourage demand and build preference for California avocados. In total, the creative

media plan is projected to achieve more than 242 million impressions between the months of March and August when California avocados are in peak season.

The Commission will continue with the successful “the best avocados have California in them” advertising campaign, which playfully embeds California avocados within thematic artwork evoking the California lifestyle. To engage CAC’s targeted audience of Premium Californians, consumer advertising will be placed on a variety of digital and outdoor media vehicles. California Avocado-branded video ads will stream on channels such as Hulu and YouTube, as well as services including Tremor video and VideoAmp. Audio ads will run on iHeart



Pinterest recipe ad example

radio, Spotify and Pandora while digital ads will appear on services such as GumGum. The Commission will run custom branded content developed by popular sites including The Kitchn and Food52. To reach consumers while they are on the road, mobile directions app Waze will direct targeted consumers to retail store locations on their routes where California avocados are available.

The digital campaign will be complemented by outdoor advertising in high-traffic California locations during June and July. Billboards and wallboards will showcase California avocados in Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego and San Francisco. In addition, a full BART train wrap will reach riders and onlookers throughout the city of San Francisco. To

round out the outdoor program, California avocado ads will be shown on 149 Volta charging stations placed in high-traffic locations and supermarket parking lots to remind shoppers to look for California on the label and add the fruit to their shopping baskets.

The Commission's year-round social media marketing program will continue to showcase engaging and informative content on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube channels. To reach younger avocado shoppers, CAC will continue its presence on TikTok. This will mark the second year the Commission has produced entertaining short-form videos for the social channel, which is popular with young consumers. 🥑



Wallscape in high-traffic outdoor urban locations will generate excitement for California avocado season.

By Tim Spann, PhD
Spann Ag Research & Consulting

ProGibb LV Plus Special Local Needs Registration Renewed

The California Avocado Commission is pleased to announce that the Special Local Needs registration for ProGibb LV Plus Plant Growth Regulator Solution (gibberellic acid) use on avocados in California has been renewed through December 31, 2025. ProGibb has been shown to effectively increase fruit size and set when applied at the cauliflower stage of bloom and has been available for use on avocados in California under an SLN registration since March 2018.

ProGibb LV Plus can be applied from the ground or by air. Ground applications should be made by mixing 12.5 fluid ounces of product in 100 gallons of water per acre. Aerial applications should be made by mixing 12.5 fluid ounces of product in 75 gallons of water per acre. Only one (1) application is allowed per year.

The restricted entry interval is 4 hours, and the preharvest interval is 0 days, so ProGibb LV Plus can be used with minimal disruption to harvesting

and other grove management activities.

Please note: A copy of the current SLN Label **must be in the possession of the user** at the time of application. A copy of the label is available online at: www.californiaavocadogrowers.com/sites/default/files/documents/ProGibb-SLN-Renewal.pdf

The signature of the County Agricultural Commissioner or their designee must be obtained prior to the use of ProGibb LV Plus.

This SLN is only valid for the ProGibb LV Plus product manufactured by Valent BioSciences Corporation. Generic gibberellic acid products may not be used under this SLN.

If you have any questions about this SLN registration and the use of ProGibb LV Plus, please consult with your local PCA or you may contact Tim Spann at tim@spannag.com. 🍷



Cauliflower stage inflorescence during early bloom of 'Hass' avocado.

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Grower Profile



Camlam Farms:

Deep, Deep Roots and a Promising Future

By Tim Linden

Knowing that the origin of the name for Camlam Farms comes from a combination of Camarillo and the Lamb family, it would not be a reach to suspect that the agricultural entity was named after the city in which it is located. But in fact, it is the city of Camarillo that was named after the farming operation.

Today Camlam Farms grows crops on about 1,000 acres in Ventura County that were part of a 10,000-acre Spanish land grant called Rancho Calleguas, bought by Juan Camarillo in 1876. Mr. Camarillo's great-great-grandson, John Lamb, co-owns the operation with other descendants of the Camarillo family, and is the president of Camlam Farms Inc. His great-grandfather Adolfo Camarillo is credited with establishing and naming Camarillo, along with his brother Juan Jr., in about 1910. The town became an incorporated city in 1964.

Lamb says from the very beginning Rancho Calleguas was a farm with walnuts, lima beans, sugar beets and cattle as its main crops. Over the years, most of the acres were sold off and developed but the current acreage has remained in the family for 150 years. Robert Lamb, John's father, was the proprietor of the farming operation in the 1970s when avocados were first planted on its slopes. "They planted citrus and avocados around 1977," Lamb recalls.

While his father was managing the operation through the 1980s, John Lamb was an active certified public accountant in Arizona. In 1989, John moved back to California about the time of his mother's death. She was the direct descendant of the Camarillo family. A couple of years later, Robert



John Lamb

Lamb met his second wife at the World Avocado Congress in Mexico. She was from Spain and the two began splitting time between Spain and California.

It was at this point that John and his two brothers, Robert III and David, who were part owners of Camlam Farms, began running it. John took over the reins as his brothers pursued

other interests though they remained in ownership positions. In the early '90s, the farm consisted of about 120 acres of avocados and 20 acres of citrus, with other land leased out to row crop growers.

The operation has expanded over the years and now has 300 acres of avocados, 175 acres of citrus dominated by lemons, and about 65 acres of row crops. There is still room for expansion and it is an ongoing project. "We've discovered that avocados love the volcanic soil on our mountain slopes so we have continually added avocado plantings," Lamb said.

Camlam Farms has been one of the more supportive operations regarding the California Avocado Commission's breeding program. In fact, the Lamb Hass is so named because the variety was discovered during a trial conducted on the family farm. "My father started varietal research in the late 1980s," Lamb said. "Over three years in the late '80s/early '90s, we planted 18,000 seedlings in our groves. The research program developed the Lamb Hass, GEM, Surprise and Marvel in our groves."

Lamb is cautiously optimistic about the prospects for the GEM. "Some people think it's the answer," he said. "We have 4,500 GEM trees in the ground."

He added that the ability to plant a lot of GEM trees per acre is a plus but he's not sold on the 500-600 trees per acre that some growers are trying. "I do think 250-300 is doable," he said.

Not surprisingly, Camlam Farms has made the Lamb Hass an important part of its program with 40 acres devoted to that variety. John said the Lamb Hass tree produces a larger piece of fruit in a later time frame, which fits in well with the company's effort. It is also planted in a high density configuration with 225 trees to the acre.

Camlam currently has a number of rootstock trials being conducted on its property. "We've always been very interested in the work being done by the PRC (CAC's Production Research Committee). I hope they keep it going," he said. "We are only going to get better if we keep producing better varieties."

Because Lamb had been running the operation for 30 years, and is now in his mid-60s, he and his two older brothers decided several years ago that they needed a succession plan. They discussed it among themselves and with the next generation of the family, and subsequently offered Robert's daughter, Maureen Cottingham, the opportunity to join the family business as the eventual leader of Camlam Farms. "We looked at logical successors and Maureen made the most sense," said John. "She had executive experience and the passion and smarts to get it done."

At the time, Maureen was the executive director of the Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers Alliance. She explained that she earned her degree in agricultural business from Cal



Maureen Cottingham

Poly San Luis Obispo, where she did an internship with a San Luis Obispo winery. That led to the position in Sonoma where she served for 17 years. "I never thought I'd come back to the ranch," she said. "But it is an incredible opportunity. We love the idea of raising our kids on the family ranch."

She and her husband, Adam, talked it over and decided to make the move. He is a contractor so he stayed up in Sonoma for most of the first year finishing up projects while she moved back down to Camarillo in May of 2021. Though she claims she knew little about agriculture when she arrived, John said she has been a quick learner and a great asset. The succession plan called for a five-year transition in which John would slowly pull away and Maureen would take on increasingly more responsibility.

"Initially, I took a deep dive into everything," she said. "I've looked to our ranch foreman for his help and am trying to be a sponge learning everything he has learned over the past 50 years. I have also been learning about the players and learning the lingo."

John noted that he took a similar path when he came aboard 30 years ago. "I called it management by wandering around," he quipped.

Maureen said her current strategic plan has been to divide what she needs to know into sections and tackle one at a time. "In 2023, I'm taking a deep dive into the financial aspect of running this company."



Camlam Farms

She said there are many elements involved on the business side and she is concentrating on those elements this year.

When asked, John didn't call Camlam Farms "a well-oiled machine" but instead joked that it is "moderately lubricated."

But kidding aside, he said running a 1,000 acre ranch is big business and it deserves a dedicated manager with lots of energy. Currently, he said the ranch is on a five-year plan to automate the irrigation process, including all the valves. "That's a significant investment," he said. "It's like trying to figure out how to eat an elephant. We have 20 blocks of avocados and about 10-12 blocks of citrus."

Over the years, John said the avocado acreage has yielded an average of 7,500 pounds per acre. The farm has several water sources, including moderately priced water from its water district, which helps the economics of growing avocados and citrus. "It helps to have both citrus and avocados," John said, noting that over the years if one crop doesn't have a good year, the other one does.

He added that one cultural practice that Camlam Farms adopted from Chilean growers, after he visited avocado growers in that country, was to girdle its trees. "We girdle half the tree per year which helps avoid alternate bearing years."

Maureen recently joined the CAC Board. John served on

the board for many years and was the chairman for several years as well. He also served on the task force that hired Jeff Oberman as president late last year, replacing the retired Tom Bellamore, who was with CAC for about 30 years.

Both John and Maureen are very bullish about the future of the California avocado business, and believe CAC is in very good hands. Maureen was pleased with the hiring of vice president of marketing, Terry Splane, who has now replaced the retiring Jan DeLyser. "We have an awesome trifecta running CAC with Jeff, Ken (Melban) and Terry," she said. "I'm excited about the future."

John chimed in that while 2023 might be challenging, growers received record returns in 2022. Maureen added that CAC's marketing strategy is a winning one. "Our consumers want to know where their fruit is coming from and that serves us well during the California season," she said. "We continue to get a premium price for our fruit selling to the West Coast. And the other sources of avocados allow year-round availability, which I'm learning is a very good thing for us."

It appears that Camlam Farms' strategy is also a winning one with a 150-year rich history in the rearview mirror and a steady hand in place to navigate the future. 🥑

Growers Help Tell the California Avocado Story

By telling their stories, California avocado growers help consumers “put a face and a place” to the fruit they buy — bringing to life their environmentally friendly growing practices and the appeal of locally grown produce.

To share these stories in an impactful manner with targeted consumers, in the summer and fall of 2022, the California Avocado Commission marketing team visited groves from Pauma Valley to Morro Bay, capturing photos and videos of six California avocado growers/grower families and their groves. The Commission worked with growers who had volunteered to participate and were willing to share information about themselves and their growing practices. In addition, the Commission visited California avocado grower families who were in the process of transitioning grove management to the next generation. During the grove visits, a professional photographer and videographer captured top-quality photos and videos. CAC Online Marketing Director Zac Benedict then edited the videos to execute the project in a cost-efficient manner.

In total, last season 23 grower profiles on CaliforniaAvocado.com were added or updated with current information concerning farm management practices as well as growers’ preferred ways to enjoy the Golden State fruit. Two growers generously shared their favorite California avocado recipes, which are being added to the consumer website recipe database and slated for use in retail marketing programs. Tara Axell Rosenthal of Santa Paula created *California Cowboy Caviar* and the Wilkie family of Morro Bay shared their



CAC Online Marketing Director Zac Benedict, (center) interviewed growers including Norm Kachuck (left) about their growing practices and personal history.

favorite *Garlic Salt Guacamole* recipe.

The professionally captured grower photos and videos also are available for a variety of retail selling materials and retail digital and social marketing programs. Retailers and foodservice operators appreciate utilizing these assets in stores and on digital channels to showcase California avocado growers and share information about locally grown produce. By featuring growers committed to producing the best avocados on the planet, the Commission's marketing team can create cost-effective marketing assets that resonate with consumers and help drive brand loyalty and purchases of California avocados.

The Commission plans to visit additional groves during spring of 2023 to produce new assets for the upcoming season. If you are a California avocado grower and are interested in being a profiled grower in the future and/or have a family-favorite recipe you would like to share with the Commission, please contact Zac Benedict at ZBenedict@avocado.org and leave your phone and email contact information. 🥑



The Wilkie family's Garlic Salt Guacamole



The Commission featured California avocado grower families transitioning operations to the next generation, such as the Kitzman and Wilkie families.



California avocado grower Tara Axell Rosenthal shared information about her family's grove and how California avocados are grown.



California Cowboy Caviar created by Tara Axell Rosenthal



CAC's marketing team visited six California avocado groves from Morro Bay to Pauma Valley capturing photos and videos to showcase how the fruit is grown and by whom. Father and son Bill Steed and Spencer Steed were among them.

CAC Salutes International Women's Day

Trade and Consumer Public Relations Features Female Farmers

To keep California avocados top of mind among trade customers and avocado shoppers while California avocado season ramps up, a California Avocado Commission trade and consumer public relations program was created in honor of International Women's Day (March 8). The outreach features six female California avocado growers who had photography and biographical information available to CAC. (See "Growers Help Tell the California Avocado Story" on p. 21.)



Jessica Hunter

"The Commission is happy to celebrate International Women's Day and the many women involved in the California avocado industry," said California Avocado Commission Online Marketing Director Zac Benedict. "In March our public relations team conducted outreach to consumer and trade media outlets to share stories of a few of these hard-working farmers."

Jessica Hunter was the first third-generation family member to join the family business after college. After 20 years, she is now CEO of Del Rey Avocado, her family's avocado growing and packing company located in San Diego County. Her daily duties include managing the California avocado procurement team and the operations of both the packing and distribution centers on the West Coast. She also manages more than 100 acres of the company's avocado groves. Jessica serves on the Executive Committee of the California Avocado Commission board of directors and is an active spokesperson for the California avocado industry.

Maureen L. Cottingham is a sixth-generation member of a farming family in Camarillo, California. After almost two decades of working with the Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers, a marketing and educational trade organization, Maureen has joined their family business where she is proud to be continuing their family's farming tradition as well as learning the various business and farming aspects of an avocado and citrus operation. Maureen currently is serving as a board member of the California Avocado Commission and member of the California Avocado Commission's marketing committee. Locally,



Maureen L. Cottingham

Maureen serves as board director of the Ventura County Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business. Maureen and her husband Adam live in Camarillo with their three young children – Quincey (8), Cash (6) and Charlie (20 months).

Catherine Pinkerton Keeling's family has been growing California avocados for more than half a century, but that didn't make her a farmer. After college Catherine (and her

husband Travis) volunteered for the Peace Corps in Costa Rica, helping women become economically independent as part of a rural development program. She later became a licensed clinical social worker in the Midwest. In late 2017 when the devastating Thomas Fire destroyed her parents' home and about 70% of their avocado ranch, Catherine and Travis felt a calling to help her family rebuild their farm. A passionate advocate for California avocados and sustainable agriculture, Catherine served as an alternate on the California Avocado Commission board of directors. In November 2022 she also was elected to the board of directors of the United Water Conservation District.

Rachael Kimball Laenen is the sixth generation of her family to farm in Ventura County and the fourth to grow avocados. Before farming she worked in international motorsport spending six years working for the Mercedes AMG Petronas Formula One Team where she won three World Championships and rose to the rank of Head of Events and Hospitality. Rachael then returned to California to work for her father, growing avocados on 150 acres. Their grove was devastated by the Thomas Fire in 2017 and she has been on a steep learning curve ever since as the ranch recovery operation continues. Rachael is responsible for food safety, workplace safety, employee relations and grant applications as well as being intimately involved in crop nutrition programs, water management and harvest scheduling. Rachael is currently the Vice Chair of the California Avocado Commission board and has been a member of the Hass Avocado Committee, Market-



Catherine Pinkerton Keeling



Rachael Kimball Laenen

ing Committee, Sustainability Taskforce and Succession Taskforce. She is married to Andrew, a British photographer, and they have an infant son Eugene.

Tara Axell Rosenthal is a fifth-generation California farmer and third-generation California avocado grower. She grew up on the Axell family avocado grove but it wasn't until 2020, after her father's passing, that growing avocados became her profession. Her mother, Joanna Axell, is the owner of the family ranch, Rancho Rodoro. In order to help her mom and the avocado groves, Tara, her brother, Brandon and her husband Ryan work together to keep everything running smoothly.



Tara Axell Rosenthal



Hilary Kitzman Wilkie

Hilary Kitzman Wilkie was introduced to growing avocados on her parents' beautiful avocado grove in Morro Bay, California. She received her degree in computer science and then home-schooled four children. In 2016 when Hilary's father decided he was getting ready to retire, Hilary and her husband Andrew, who love the farm and had looked forward to assuming responsibility for it, started learning to grow California avocados. Now they manage day-to-day operations. Hilary is proud that the family avocado farm (Kitzman Fair Haven) utilizes a variety of environmentally responsible practices, including using natural leaf mulch and solar energy.

"The stories of these six women are helping to highlight the roles of women in agriculture," said Benedict. "With more female California avocado growers being available and willing to share, CAC is able to feature their stories on CaliforniaAvocado.com, social media, in marketing materials and retail programs."

The consumer PR program is an ongoing effort that started before the March 8 celebration date and continues during the California avocado season. The team crafts story content about the featured women and pitches the idea to publications that targeted avocado shoppers are likely to read. Including the story idea in these publications would remind consumers of California avocado season timing and help dimensionalize the profiles of California growers.

On the trade PR side, CAC issued a press release on March 6, 2023, noting that the California Avocado Commission, which represents growers farming on about 50,000 acres in the state, is sharing profiles of some female avocado farmers to showcase the role of women in the industry. The release stated that as with all farming, women have long been active in growing California avocados. Many California avocado growers come from multigenerational farming families, and with generational transitions happening, increasingly women are taking on avocado grove management and ag industry leadership roles. It also included an update about California avocado season expectations. Pick up of the press release leading up to and on International Women's Day was very strong, garnering more than 350,000 impressions in the first three days. Articles appeared in *And Now You Know*, *Fresh Fruit Portal*, *Fresh Plaza*, *Perishable News*, *PMG*, *The Packer*, *The Produce News*, *The Produce Reporter* and *The Shelby Report*. 🥑

Understanding Water Movement in Soils

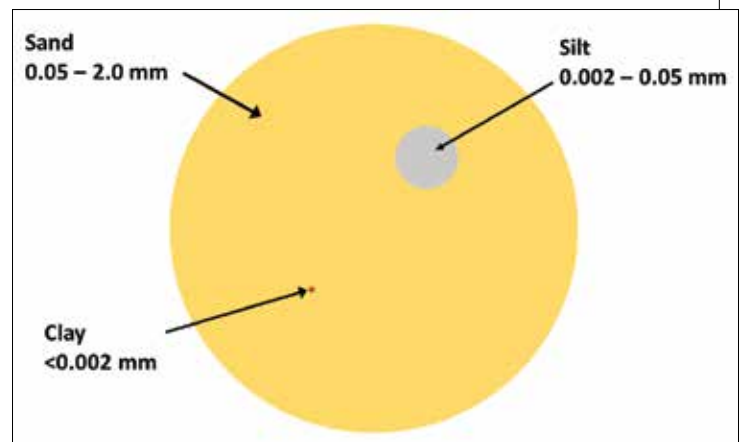
By Tim Spann, PhD
Spann Ag Research & Consulting

On January 25, 2023, the California Avocado Commission held a field day at Pine Tree Ranch. When we planned this field day, California was being inundated by atmospheric rivers so we planned for an indoor field day. Dr. Ben Faber, UC Farm Advisor, and I planned a few topics to kick off the discussion, but the attendees were armed with excellent questions and the discussion travelled far beyond our original planned topics. A question that came during the discussion of mulch had to do with the grower's observation that mulch seems to trap water and keep it from reaching the soil beneath. Interesting.

A few weeks later in the Winter 2023 edition of the UC Cooperative Extension's Topics in Subtropics Newsletter, Dr. Faber wrote an article about observations he has made of mistakes growers make when planting avocado trees. Included on his list of mistakes is incorporating amendments such as potting soil, manure or compost in the planting hole. Interesting.

These two seemingly disparate topics got me thinking and were the genesis for this article. What do these topics have in common? They both relate to the physics of water movement in soil, or any media for that matter.

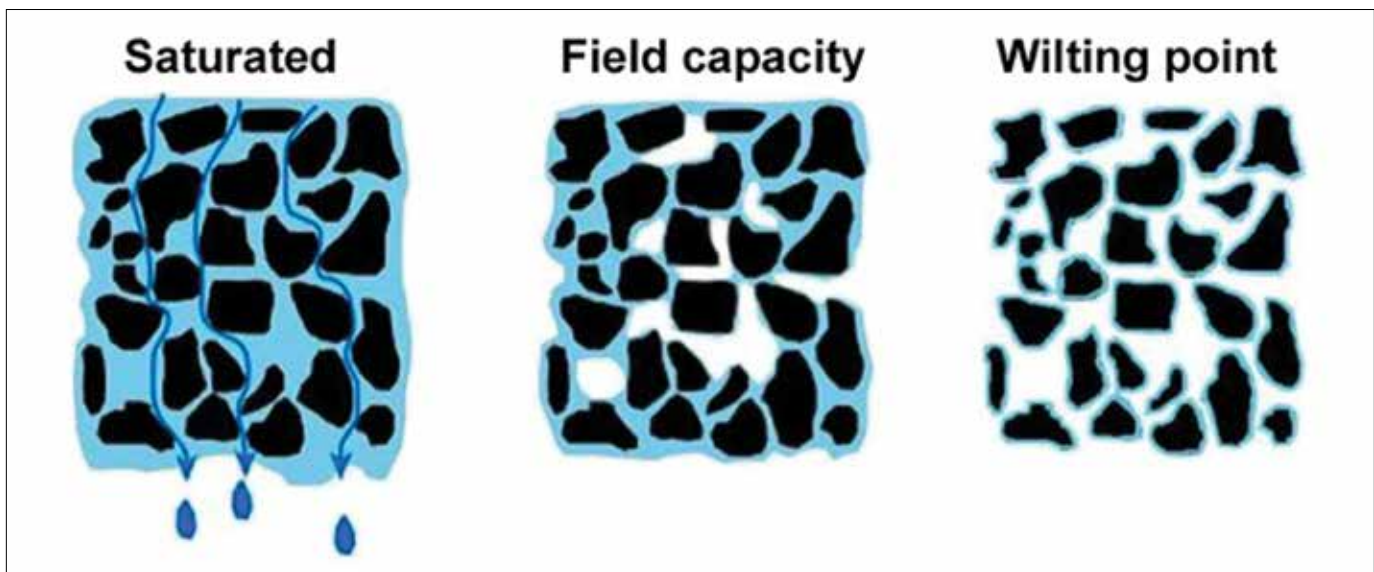
Soils are rarely uniform, rather they consist of particles of varying sizes typically classified as sand, silt and clay. Sand



A graphical representation of the relative sizes of sand, silt and clay particles.

particles are the coarsest and range in size from 0.05 mm to 2 mm. Silt particles range in size from 0.002 mm to 0.05 mm and clay particles are <0.002 mm. Particles larger than sand are classified as gravel, which is itself categorized based on size. A soil classified as loam has a majority of particles in the sand classification and lesser amounts of silt and clay. This gives the soil good water holding capacity due to the small particles and good drainage due to the sand.

But what happens in those cases when a uniform layer does



An illustration of the three phases of soil moisture — saturated, field capacity and the permanent wilting point. At saturation, all of the soil pores are filled with water, the capillary forces holding water in the soil are weak and the large pores will empty by gravity. At field capacity, the large pores have drained and filled with air, the capillary forces are strong enough to hold water against gravity and no more drainage will occur by gravity. At the permanent wilting point, the capillary forces holding water are very strong and neither gravity nor plant roots can overcome these forces to extract more water.

exist in a soil, such as a clay layer or a gravel layer? Those layers disrupt the movement of water, which can sometimes be bad and sometimes be good.

First, how does water move through soil? The basic downward movement is governed by gravity, a force we're all familiar with so I will not describe it here. That said, we all know that water doesn't just move straight down in a soil, it also moves laterally. That lateral movement is caused by capillary action.

Capillary action is the process by which water moves in all directions, even against gravity, in a soil through the fine (capillary) pores of the soil. This happens because of surface tension forces between the water and the soil particles. The strength of the surface tension forces holding water in a soil is inversely related to the pore sizes in the soil. That is, water in larger pores such as in sand, is held more weakly than water in finer pores such as in clay. When all of the pores in a soil are

full of water, the soil is saturated and water will drain from the soil by gravity until the gravitational forces equal the surface tension forces, at which point the soil will be at field capacity.

That last sentence is very important. Read it again and make sure it makes sense to you. That bit about gravity pulling water from a saturated soil is critical to understanding why mulch seems to trap water and why it's a bad idea to add amendments to the planting hole. When there are very distinct layers of different textures in a soil the rules of water movement described above only apply to the movement within a layer of a given texture, not the movement between layers.

Let's think about the example of a decomposed granite soil with a layer of coarse woody mulch on top of it. How will the water move through the mulch layer and into the soil beneath? Under microsprinkler irrigation or a "normal" rain event where the rate of water application is relatively low — in

the range of 0.25 inch per hour — the capillary action within the mulch layer will hold the water against gravity until the mulch layer becomes saturated. Once the mulch layer is saturated, the water will flow through the mulch layer and begin to moisten the soil beneath. Thus, a mulch layer can appear to trap water. To ensure a tree is properly watered, it's important that enough volume of water is applied to fully saturate the mulch layer and moisten the soil beneath it to a sufficient depth to irrigate the trees. As concerns mulch, these same principles also work in reverse — helping to trap moisture in the soil and reduce its loss to evaporation since the water cannot readily move from the soil surface to the mulch layer to the atmosphere.

Now let's consider the issue of planting a new tree. No nursery uses native soil to fill the containers they grow their young avocado trees in. However, some do incorporate some native soil in their container mix to try to produce trees that will be adapted to the native soil conditions found in California avocado groves. That said, there is still a difference in soil texture between the root ball of the young tree and the surrounding native soil. Thus, when that tree is first planted, the root ball must become saturated before the irrigation water will move into the native soil. This is why many growers start their trees on drippers to ensure the root ball receives enough water.

When amendments are added to the soil used to refill the planting hole, a situation of three different soil textures is created — the soil from the nursery, the amended soil and the native soil. In effect, by adding amendments you are creating a secondary container around the young tree. When a tree in this scenario is irrigated, the root ball must become saturated before water will move out into the amended soil, and the amended soil must become saturated before water will move out into the native soil. If insufficient water is applied to wet the unamended native soil, the tree may grow well initially but when its roots reach the edge of the amended soil they will not grow out into the dry native soil. Furthermore, there is a strong likelihood of drowning the young tree because the amended soil can become nearly saturated but not enough so that the water moves out into the native soil. This creates a hypoxic — low oxygen — environment and the roots will die.

The amended soil also can become problematic when we look at water movement from the native soil into the amended soil. The soil was probably amended to create a coarser texture soil with the belief that it would drain better. But if the amended soil dries out it is unable to draw moisture from the surrounding native soil due to the textural differences. In this case the native soil may have sufficient water to support the tree, but the water is inaccessible to the tree because it is planted in the amended soil and there is no way for that water to move from the native soil into the amended soil.

The concepts discussed here can be difficult to visualize, but thanks to the Internet you don't have to try to visualize them. In 1959, Dr. Walter Gardner, a professor at Washington State University, created what was for its time a remarkable movie demonstrating how water moves through soil layers of different textures. This movie is available on YouTube at the following URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iugY5jNGNx0>. Alternatively, searching for "water movement in soils" in the YouTube search field should bring up the movie for you. 🍷



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China's Avocado Production and Imports on the Rise

(Editor's Note: This report was prepared by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Trade Office in Guagzhou, China, in November 2022, and reprinted here with minimal edits.)

China's avocado production and imports are estimated to grow as the demand for high-quality fresh avocados continues to rise. Top consumers are females, under 35 years of age, and residing in first-tier cities. Peru continues to be the leading supplier, followed by Mexico and Chile. With new market access granted to Ke-

nya, U.S. avocados are expected to face even stronger competition in China's avocado market.

Market Overview

The retail price of domestically grown avocados and imported avocados is similar, RMB 20 - RMB 26 (\$2.90 - \$3.80) per box (including two avocados of approximately 160g each). Imported avocados have enjoyed a good reputation in China for approximately a decade. The niche consumers consider avocados a healthy choice for monounsaturated fat, vitamins and

minerals. Rising demand for avocados, partially fueled by health consciousness and increased consumer familiarity, continues to drive imports. Despite global shipping challenges related to COVID in 2021, China imported over 41,000 metric tons of fresh avocados. This level of trade is close to the 2018 import high of approximately 44,000 metric tons. Major suppliers include Peru, Mexico, and Chile, while other countries (e.g., New Zealand, Colombia, Philippines, United States) are considered new suppliers.

The growth in fresh avocado

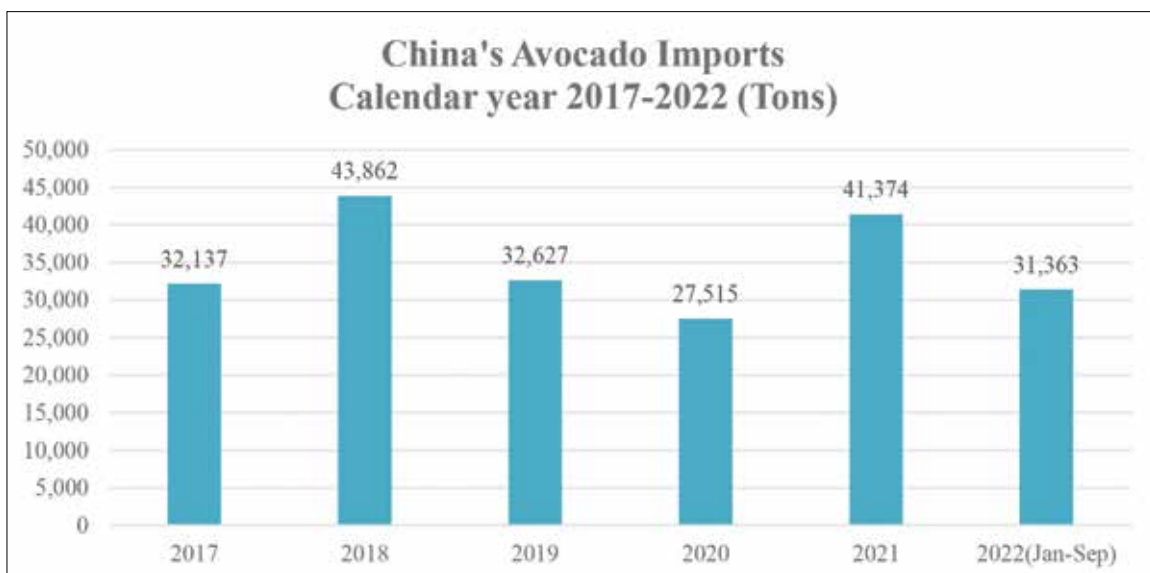


Chart 1 - China's Avocado Imports (Tons, 2017-2022)

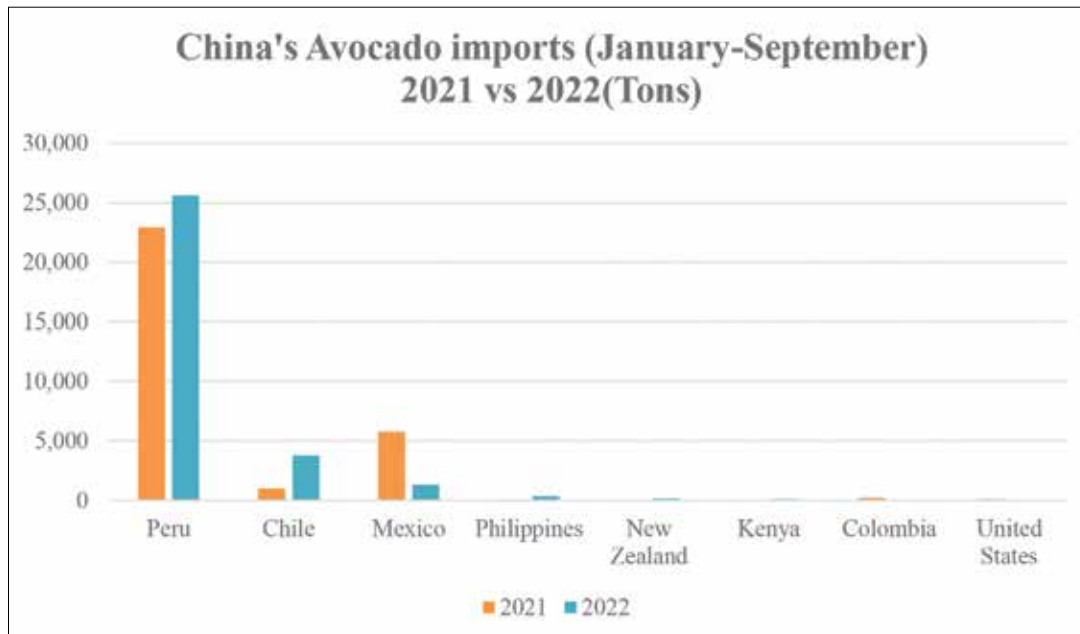


Chart 2 - China's Avocado Imports 2021 vs 2022 (January – September) (Source: Trade Data Monitor)

consumption is largely driven by the demand from the retail and wholesale business in China. Industry insiders estimate around 80% of fresh avocados are sold in retail or wholesale venues, while the remaining 20 percent are via hotel, restaurant and institutional outlets. Avocados are a popular ingredient for booming drink shops that use avocado as an ingredient in juices and teas, and for hotels and restaurants as a salad ingredient, especially in first tier cities.

China's Domestic Production

In addition to the increase in imported avocados, increasing domestic production of Hass avocados is apparent. Some producer contacts believe that fresh avocado production could reach 20,000 metric tons over the next five years, while others assert that domestic production is still in its infancy and limited by competing demands on China's land. Fruit quality continues to improve as farmers are better able to

produce to an average size and consistent taste.

China began cultivating Hass avocados approximately six years ago. Most production is in Yunnan, while some local varieties are being grown in Hainan, Guangxi and Guangdong. The country's Hass avocado production is expected to increase quickly in the coming years.

With a favorable climate, Yunnan has the largest avocado production area, with acreage currently estimated at 4,000 hectares. Local producers aim to double production within 3 years, though note that obtaining suitable and affordable farmland remains a challenge. Water supply and investments in irrigation are other factors that may limit further acreage expansion. Most avocado orchards in Yunnan sit on hills or mountains, making harvesting and transportation a difficult task. Production costs, especially for land and labor, are increasing. For instance, Yunnan avocado grow-

ers stated that the average production cost is RMB165,000-195,000 (\$25,380-\$30,000) per hectare.

Many avocados in Yunnan are grown on mountain slopes. The different altitudes cause the fruit to ripen over an extended period. Therefore, the Yunnan avocado harvest begins in late September and ends in early March. Although private companies and research institutes are developing new avocado varieties for local cultivation, the main variety remains Hass. Yunnan avocado farmers reported their yields range from 2.3 metric tons (MT) to 4.5 MT per hectare, noting that there is still room for improvement.

Application of post-harvest technology is limited for domestically grown avocados and cold storage is not often used during transportation. Without ripening facilities, local distributors report either letting avocados ripen naturally or storing them with bananas. This could result in unstable

quality and a high percentage of loss. Most domestically produced avocados make it to first tier cities, while very little is consumed near where they are produced.

Trade and Competitors

According to data from China Customs, Chinese imports of avocados were steady, showing a minor 3% increase from January to September 2022 in comparison with the same period in 2021. Increases mainly came from Peru and Chile.

Peru remains the leading avocado supplier to China. In 2021, China imported over 26,000 metric tons of fresh avocados from Peru, accounting for 64% of the imported avocado market share. From January to September 2022, China imported about 25,611 metric tons of Peruvian avocados, up 11% from the previous year. Peruvian avocados are available from March until September.

Mexico and Chile are two other major suppliers. In 2021, China imported almost 13,400 metric tons of avocados from Mexico and Chile, representing one third of the imported fruit market share. Mexico used to be the largest avocado supplier in China but is losing ground. Traders reported that although the quality of Mexican avocados are creamier, the loss ratio is relatively high due to the long-distance transportation, which reduces the shelf life. Other current suppliers include New Zealand, Colombia, the Philippines, and the United States.

Fresh Hass avocados from Kenya received market access to China on June 1, 2022. Kenya is the largest avocado producer in Africa and exports about 40% of its production. Kenya exported a total of 84,000 tons of avocados to the world in 2021. The season runs from mid-February to November. Other destinations include the United

Arab Emirates, Finland, and France. Traders believe Kenya could become a very competitive source of fresh avocados if the fruit quality proves to be good and the price reasonable. This past summer, the first trial shipments of avocados from Kenya arrived in Shanghai by air. In comparison to Peruvian avocados, the Kenyan avocados were reportedly in good condition and well-priced (approximately 8 to 15% less).

Marketing and Consumption

China is a huge country with complex regional differences. Tastes, customs, culture, business practices and government regulations vary from region to region and city to city. Furthermore, consumer behaviors are changing dramatically due to booming e-commerce sales for food and agricultural products. Currently, first tier cities remain the key consumption markets, mainly because only a small niche group of consumers are aware of this healthy fruit.

Overall, retail and wholesale venues are the dominant sectors for distributing fresh avocados. The primary outlets are high-end supermarkets (e.g., Ole, Sam's Club), specialized fruit chains (e.g., Pagoda, Xianfeng), and online shopping platforms (e.g., JD.com, Tmall, Benlai, Pupu). Newer technologies, such as online-to-offline commerce stores are also selling avocados.

Mr. Avocado is a joint venture between Mission Produce, Pagoda Fruit Stores, and distributor Lantao International, and is the only shipper/receiver in China with one brand from multiple producing countries. Mr. Avocado is very successful in marketing imported, ready-to-eat fresh avocados across China, mainly through its high-end retail distribution network. Mr. Avocado reportedly represents one

fifth of China's total imported avocado market share. Fresh avocados with Mr. Avocado stickers are usually packed in a transparent shell box of 2, 4 or 6 pieces, depending on consumer preferences in the area. The most popular size is 180 grams per piece, while 220 grams per piece is considered a large fruit and 130g is considered small. The average retail package is two pieces (160g each) for approximately RMB19.9 (\$2.90) per box.

In addition to branded products, distributors also handle unbranded avocados and often package them in-house. In June 2022, a 10kg case would sell for RMB200 (\$30.8) per case on the wholesale market.

Per traders, the key to success for imported avocados in China is to maintain superior quality control, consistent supplies, and reasonable prices. Consumption of avocados in China is heavily influenced by the importers and retailers who play an important role in purchasing, distribution, and marketing. With a comparatively smaller volume of U.S. avocados on the market, marketing is key. Branding to a niche group of high-end consumers, communicating its superior quality and supporting activities about proper handling and consumption could help differentiate California Hass and garner higher than average prices. For example, educational seminars on the nutritional benefits of avocados may help enhance consumer awareness. In addition, teaching consumers how to eat avocados (e.g., recipe ideas) could also help increase demand. 🥑

(ATO DISCLAIMER: This report contains assessments of commodity and trade issues made by USDA staff and not necessarily statements of official U.S. government policy.)

Later Start to Season Should Aid California's Marketing Efforts

Though it appears to be general consensus that the marketing of the 2023 California avocado crop will be more challenging than a year ago, handlers also are noting that the later start to this year's season will work in the growers' favor.

"We have started with California but only in a very light way," said Peter Shore, vice president of product management for Calavo Growers, Santa Paula, CA., on March 7. "We expect volume to gradually increase throughout the month but it still should be light until late March or early April."

The later-than-usual start will allow Calavo to have marketable volume until late summer. "April, May, June and into July should be the peak shipping period, but we do expect to push some fruit into September," Shore said.

He added that there has been little reason for most California growers to get started as the higher-than-usual rain totals have made it more difficult to harvest and also gives fruit a sizing boost as it stays on the tree and soaks up the rain. "The weather has been cool in recent weeks so there has been no hurry to get started," he added.

The Calavo executive did not quarrel with the California Avocado

Commission's pre-season estimate of 257 million pounds for the season, but he noted that the company's fieldmen believe that number might be a tad ambitious.

Shore said the stretching of the season from March into September will allow those customers who love California fruit to have it for an extended period of time. It also should help the California avocado be in strong demand throughout its season. "We see good demand for avocado sales in the second quarter, increasing as we move from spring into summer," he said.

He added that each retailer is different as to when they want to start on their California fruit program. "When they start requesting it, we will pick it," he said, adding that the delayed start is helping the fruit size, which helps the grower, as larger fruit is always sold at a premium compared to the smaller sizes. Shore expects a larger profile this year with a greater preponderance of 48s and larger.

He said it is no secret that this year's FOB price is lower than last year because of strong global supplies, which are creating very good opportunities for retail promotions. "There is definitely a good supply of avocados out there and

retailers are promoting the crop very well," he said. "We expect good promotions (for California fruit) leading up to Cinco de Mayo and continuing through Memorial Day and into the summer."

He also mentioned that there will be a relatively good supply of both Lamb Hass and the newer GEM variety of avocados this season. Both varieties have become popular among growers because of their ability to support higher density plantings and produce larger fruit that matures later in the season. "In July we expect to see a pretty steady supply of these varieties," he said.

Gary Clevenger, managing member of Freska Produce International, Oxnard, CA, told *From the Grove* in early March that the packer/handler had not started marketing any California fruit yet. "A lot of growers are waiting to see what's going to happen with the (field) price," he said. "They are taking a 'wait and see' approach so I don't think we will have much fruit until mid or late March. Most growers don't seem to need or want to pick at this point."

A look at the daily pick count bears that out. "So far," Clevenger said on March 7, "I don't think we have picked 1% of the projected volume."

The numbers confirm that, as in

early March of 2022, California was sending about 8 million pounds of fruit to market each week. This year, weekly shipments did not top 1 million pounds during any week through the first week of March.

With the smaller crop, Clevenger expects very little California fruit to be marketed east of Denver as there will be strong demand in California and the other western states. He agreed with Shore that the crop might not reach 257 million pounds. “That sounds high,” he said. “We’ve had a couple of growers that lost quite a bit of fruit in the wind down south (San Diego County.)”

The Freska executive was buoyed by the rising avocado market, which received a nice bump in late February/early March. “Right now, 48s are being quoted at \$32-\$33,” he said, which was about \$10 more per box than mid-February.

Still a price in the low \$30s was only about half what it was a year earlier. “The lower price means there have been a lot of promos and movement has been very good,” he said.

Clevenger said a new wrinkle in the California deal this year will be the additional volume from other varieties, including GEM. He said retailers may be asking for a bit of a discount to buy GEMs simply because it’s new. But he added GEMs grow much larger than the Hass so even if you have to give a little bit of a discount, the size profile will more than make up for it because larger fruit returns more dollars per pound at the farmgate. “We expect the GEMs to peak on 32s, 36s and 40s. It looks like a Hass and is a good eating piece of fruit. And it grows on the interior of the tree, which means its less susceptible to wind and other damage,” he said. “A lot of growers were planting GEMS three or four years ago so we are going to get more fruit this year. It’s going to be a bigger part of the volume. It will be in-

teresting to watch what it does.”

Index Fresh Vice President of Sales Debbie Willmann also commented on the expected trajectory of the California crop. “As this season is starting with much different market conditions than last year, along with unusual weather delays, we anticipate growers will harvest with limited volumes in March, increase weekly volumes in April, and hit peak harvesting in the months of May and June.”

She added that Index Fresh, which is headquartered in Corona, CA, expects to begin transitioning some retail and foodservice business in April with promotable volumes expected to last through July.

Like the other handlers interviewed, Willmann said support for California avocados goes beyond the state’s borders. “There is a loyal customer base for California Grown, or locally grown, that spans the entire West Coast up to Washington, and that includes neighboring states such as Arizona, Nevada and Idaho,” she said.

Keith Blanchard, California field manager for Index Fresh, discussed some other aspects of this season including the size of the fruit and the effects the welcome rain will have on the crop, both this year and next. “The rain has definitely been beneficial for this year,” he said. “It’s long overdue and very much needed.”

He added that the rain could result in an increase in the estimated tonnage of the 2023 crop as it helps the crop size. “The overall tonnage in any year is very dependent on growers’ decisions about when they will pick their fruit,” he said. “Last year, the early market was very good so a lot of fruit was picked early and it wasn’t allowed to size” to its full potential.

This year, the opposite in-grove situation is at hand with growers letting the fruit sit on the tree as the field

price improves. That delay offers the additional advantage of helping the fruit size, which Blanchard said could result in more tonnage. “I always thought that the estimate was a little low,” he said, admitting that “I am an optimist and usually think it’s too low.”

But this year, he believes that optimism might be rewarded as the rainstorms and harvest delay work in tandem to grow the crop. Blanchard expects this year’s Hass crop to peak on 48s and 60s.

He added the beneficial effects of the well-above normal rainfall will also stretch into next season. “The rain appears to be bringing on a very good bloom for 2024,” he said.

As he spoke on Friday, March 10, he predicted that the following week will see a lot more California fruit in the marketplace. The field price was on the rise and more and more growers were indicating a desire to get started in the next week or two.

Blanchard also was optimistic about the opportunities for the GEM variety this year. “The estimate is for 6 million pounds, but I think that could be light,” he said. “There are a lot of GEM groves coming on.”

He said industry talk predicted the GEM volume would take a significant jump this year but the pre-season estimate only predicted a 1-million-pound increase from 2022 to 2023. “We are expecting a two-fold jump at some point,” he said. “If not this year then next year I think we could see 10-12 million pounds of GEMs.”

The Index field manager said it’s a good option for the grower and it also gives the retailer a new piece of fruit to sell. He noted that nursery sales of GEM trees are still very robust pointing to a bright future for the new California variety. 🍷



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