



# CAC Annual Meetings Return After COVID-19 Hiatus

By Tim Linden

**A**fter a three-year absence because of pandemic restrictions, the California Avocado Commission's traditional series of three spring annual meetings returned in April, sporting a new look.

Of course, growers were well aware of the Commission's biggest change, which was the makeup of its leadership team. Jeff Oberman, who was hired as president and CEO last fall, kicked off each of the three meetings with the introduction of himself and the two other members of senior leadership.

Oberman came to the position with a solid resume as he spent about 25 years in association management, including more than 20 years with United Fresh, and also served five years as a vice president of sales and strategic programs with PRO\*ACT, a leading distributor of fresh produce.

Ken Melban is no stranger to CAC as he has been with the organization for 12 years, but he was promoted in the last six months to vice president of industry affairs and operations. In this role, he continues to lead the Commission's industry affairs programs but has also taken on the financial and administrative operations of the organization.

The newest member of the management team is Terry Splane as vice president of marketing. He has an impressive 30-year background in food marketing, having recently

served as the Impossible Foods head of partner success & strategy as that became one of the fastest growing brands in the plant-based food category.

Oberman emphasized that the team wants to hear from the grower community as it wants to be laser focused on the needs of California avocado growers. He said CAC is analyzing every dollar it spends to make sure it is using those dollars wisely. He added that CAC is taking a more collaborative approach in the industry affairs arena to leverage activity by other groups and achieve positive outcomes at a lower cost. On the marketing front, he said the Commission's budget is designed to maximize the dollars spent directly on promotion, concentrating on retail and foodservice buyers who are proven supporters of California avocados and its premium pricing position. In the research arena, Oberman said the "focus is on efforts that have a high likelihood for adding value to California avocado growers."

The current challenging market conditions did not escape Oberman's gaze as he noted that world avocado supplies have led to lower prices for growers. He said labor issues also are a concern as it appears that Congress will once again avoid addressing the issue with meaningful immigration reform. Long-term water solutions as well as an ever-growing supply

of imported avocados are additional headwinds facing California growers.

But the produce industry veteran said there also are some positives to point to and opportunities to explore. On the plus side is the tremendous amount of rain that the state – and all the avocado growing districts – received this year. Oberman said that rain was good for the 2023 crop but it also has the potential of creating a very good crop in 2024. Production research has produced some promising results both in rootstock work as well as irrigation and water management.

Oberman said CAC also wants to engage with other producing countries to highlight marketing opportunities in markets other than the United States. As foreign producers continue to increase their production, Oberman said they must launch promotional efforts in other countries to grow worldwide consumption.

Melban followed Oberman to the podium and shared information that had been compiled by and provided by Cirad. His presentation illustrated that worldwide avocado supplies are currently outpacing demand and it will take several years for supply and demand to get in sync again. “We are at a tipping point,” he said.

Crunching the numbers to give a 40,000-foot view of the situation, Melban revealed that there are 1.2 million acres of avocados planted worldwide. As of 2020, avocados were in eighth place in terms of tonnage for global trade of fresh fruits. When measured in dollars, the avocado was in fourth place, only trailing fresh bananas, grapes and apples.

Those are impressive numbers; the challenges come when examining the supply curve vs. demand. “Over the last six years, we have seen a 50% increase in planted acres across the globe,” he said, noting that global acreage skyrocketed from 317,000 hectares in 2016 to 492,000 ha in 2022.

Those acreage increases are largely coming from Latin America, but other regions, including the Mediterranean, Africa and Oceania, have joined the avocado planting frenzy.

As those groves mature and produce fruit at an increasing yield per acre rate, it is seemingly undeniable that consumption will lag behind. However, Melban noted that there are opportunities for significant increases in consumption. For example, California consumes avocados at a rate of 10.5 pounds per per-

son per year, which is 25% greater than the rest of the country. And Mexico is a world leader at a per capita consumption rate of close to 18 pounds.

The challenge lies in the fact that 50% of total world avocado production is sold in the United States, which is clearly the most lucrative market.

Melban said the U.S. avocado marketing model, which revolves around the establishment of the Hass Avocado Board two decades ago, is working. In his presentation, he revealed that CAC’s senior leadership is proactively working with world avocado leaders to encourage the development of equally robust marketing efforts in the European Union and Asia. “The U.S. can no longer be the only cash cow,” he said, noting that the key to success is investing in marketing by these other producing countries.

Melban, who continues to wear the legislative affairs hat for the Commission, reported on an effort in the California Legislature to require all foreign-produced fruits and vegetables sold in California to self-attest that the products are grown and packed in compliance with California’s labor laws and the state’s specific health and environmental laws.

While this seems like a noble effort, Melban called it a “heavy lift” and pointed out that the California supermarket industry is opposed to the bill. CAC has taken no position. “The last thing we want to do is pick a fight with the people



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who buy the majority of your product,” he told the growers.

He did report on a positive effort in the U.S. Congress to help offset costs related to specific wildfire damage. CAC is currently working with congressional leaders to broaden the scope of the bill.

Another legislative/regulatory issue that CAC is involved in revolves around sustainability. He said consumers and produce buyers care about the issue and want their food to be produced in an environmentally friendly way. Melban said CAC is involved in this effort to “tell our own story before someone else does.” CAC wants avocado growers to get credit for what they are already doing. Melban said the Commission is pursuing funding to assist in developing an avocado sustainability program, which would provide details and documentation that will help tell the California avocado grower sustainability story.

Splane spent his time at the podium both introducing himself and giving an overview of CAC’s marketing philosophy. He noted he has a love for agriculture, which was nurtured as a young kid on the family farm in the state of Washington.

Concerning the marketing model being followed by CAC, he said it begins with the realization that there is a finite budget and so CAC must use a very targeted approach. “Who’s the right target? What’s the right marketing mix? What message resonates for the greatest results,” he asked and answered.

He noted that CAC continues to focus on what he called “Premium Californians” as the primary target for California avocados. He said the “locally sourced” message resonates well with this group, who are defined as avocado purchasers who will pay a premium for high quality foods. As a group, Premium Californians over-index on education and income. Their median age is 35 and they are major consumers of social media.

He explained that the marketing process includes creating awareness, getting consumers to consider buying, and then converting them to purchase. Splane went through the various avenues and strategies CAC is employing this season to move the crop. He noted that the California-centric message the Commission has utilized over the last few years is once again center stage.

He called CAC’s marketing strategy “insight driven” noting that it is based on market and consumer research. For example, sustainability is an important factor in purchasing decisions for all generations, but it is particularly important for younger shoppers. Research shows that 65% of baby boomers consider sustainability important, while 75% of Generation Z are influenced by the sustainability piece.

Tim Spann, who manages CAC’s research program director for CAC, discussed the association’s philosophy when it comes to spending research dollars. He said about six years ago the board shifted the emphasis from new varietal and rootstock research to an effort that relied heavily on input

from growers. “We want to fund the research that growers need,” he said. “Not just what the researchers want to do.”

He added that CAC is focused on one- to three-year projects that result in a production advantage. Additionally, CAC encourages researchers to go out and find additional sources of funding so CAC isn’t carrying the full load of a research project. “We want to maximize every dollar that comes out of the pockets of growers,” he said, adding that communicating the results are just as important as achieving them. To this end, CAC uses its publications, webinars and field days to publicize results and progress.

Recently Spann said ongoing projects have involved pests and diseases (Avocado Branch Canker, Avocado Seed Weevils, Ecology of the Avocado Lace Bug), commercial-scale field testing of five advanced rootstock selections and cultural management practices involving water use and irrigation.

During the meeting in San Luis Obispo, two researchers from Cal Poly SLO – Rashaan Souikane and Lauren Garner – reported on the ongoing rootstock test being conducted in the campus-owned avocado grove. The Cal Poly team is working in conjunction with UC Riverside researchers to analyze the performance of five rootstocks over various grove conditions. The rootstocks were developed over many years at UCR but have never been commercialized. It’s still early in the effort, but to date, there has not been significant difference between the test rootstocks and the industry standard, Dusa.

The Cal Poly researchers did note some interesting observations that they will continue to follow. Hass avocado trees on PP45 rootstock had significantly greater vigor with respect to height and trunk circumference above and below the graft union compared to those on Dusa. There were no significant differences in overall health, heat damage and salinity damage detected between the UCR experimental rootstocks and Dusa. None of the experimental rootstocks evaluated displayed grafting incompatibilities with the Hass scion.

Ali Montazar, who is with University of California Cooperative Extension, reported on a water use and effective irrigation management project. He noted that 12 mature avocado sites in different climates are being studied with various row orientations and slopes, tree spacings (108 to 360 trees/ac), soil textures (sandy loam to silty loam), elevations (from 160 to 1,500 ft. above sea level), and water sources (Colorado River, wells and reclaimed water). The first year’s data show tremendous variability in tree water needs among locations as well as throughout the season within a given grove.

Spann reported that this is a new project, with the data presented by Montazar representing only one year of research and only from half of the sites. The remaining sites were established this year. He said it was too early to draw any “conclusions” from the data as there are two more years of data collection remaining. 🍌