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Talking about Sustainability



Although sustainability has many definitions — from environmentally friendly to ethically sourced and responsibly grown to economically viable — across the globe, sustainability has become part of everyday conversations. California avocado growers have long complied with the laws and regulations of the U.S. government and California and compared to some imports this compliance already creates some sustainability advantages.

Several years ago, CAC began subtly integrating messaging about sustainability into consumer and trade communications. Today, it has evolved to a more prominent role in our advertising — lending authenticity and credibility to California avocado messaging. Many of CAC's sustainability communications are deliberately broad, using key messages such as “locally grown and sustainably farmed,” “responsibly grown” and “ethically sourced”. These

messages have been approved by the USDA and have value in the competitive avocado industry as media, consumer advocacy groups, consumers, activists, industry representatives and global competitors have turned their sights on the topic.

This season sustainability has come to the fore across the globe. The Hass Avocado Board's vision is for its Avocado Sustainability Center to become the premier provider of sustainability research, data and information to help secure a better future for the Hass avocado industry. HAB wants to establish itself as a trusted thought-leader in sustainability with work focused around three tenants: healthy foods, healthy people and a healthy planet. Research funds are targeted around capturing carbon, building soil health, water use and efficiency, higher density planting, supporting strong communities and renewable energy.

Possibly spurred on by significant negative press surrounding environmental and ethical concerns about the production of Avocados from Mexico, the Avocado Institute of Mexico, which encompasses the Association of Avocado Exporting Producers and Packers of Mexico and the Mexican Hass Avocado Importers Association, recently announced a sustainability initiative

focused on four very specific priorities:

1. A water resource management program by 2026
2. A plan regarding conserving biodiversity and ecological connectivity, protecting and restoring local ecosystems, reducing the impact on the environment
3. Enhancing carbon sequestration with a goal of a net-zero carbon footprint through the avocado supply chain by 2035
4. Reducing deforestation/achieving net zero deforestation landscape by 2035

The Colombian Hass avocado industry has established sustainability benchmarks for environmental, social and economic impacts. Further, they claim their nation has an edge because their avocados “do not rely on man-made irrigation” given their “35,000 acres currently planted are naturally irrigated with plentiful rainfall.”

The Commission is lending its voice to the sustainability conversation via several avenues. CAC President Ken Melban and California avocado growers Jamie Johnson and Daryn Miller serve as panel advisors for the HAB sustainability initiative. Further, CAC’s marketing has broadened sustainability communication with USDA-approved key messaging that showcases “locally grown and sustainably farmed,” “responsibly grown” and “ethically sourced” California avocados. Across our trade and consumer communications, we feature sustainability messaging when it is appropriate — and we do so by specifically focusing on five areas:

- How locally grown avocados make a difference
- Benefits of environmentally friendly farming
- How our industry supports healthy communities
- What makes California avocados ethically sourced

- How our industry strengthens California’s economy

For years, data from CAC tracking studies has demonstrated sustainability messaging resonates with our targeted consumers and increases the perceived value of the locally grown fruit. Further, this messaging is a very good fit with select trade customers’ brand strategies. However, some consumers are pushing for more information and want to understand what we mean by such terms as “responsibly grown.”

As we watch interest in sustainability increase across the globe — and monitor global competitors’ efforts to demonstrate their commitment to sustainable initiatives — competitively, the California avocado industry needs to have a voice and be part of the conversation about it. Sustainability is not new to our industry and while I am sometimes asked by growers if there is a risk in CAC talking about sustainability when there are differences between growers and their level of commitment to these initiatives, my response is this: I believe there is more risk in *not* talking, responsibly, about California avocado sustainability. Especially now, when it is an increasing part of the conversation about avocados.

Being the locally grown choice for most of our customers and consumers and complying with the robust laws and regulations of California can provide the California avocado industry with a significant advantage versus other sources of supply. As consumer, government and grower predilections undulate we need to continue to be nimble and adjust messaging, especially as our distribution grows beyond California. To be prepared our team is researching what resonates regionally. Keeping the conversation open there also may be opportunities, collectively and individually, to learn from other industry sustainability initiatives. 🥑



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