

By Rachael Laenen  
Board of Directors Chair



## Get Involved... We're Better Together

I, like many of you, did not follow a straight or narrow path to get where I am today. Although my family had been growing avocados for more than 100 years — and had been farming for even longer than that — I was adamant I would *not* be a farmer and I would *not* be living in California. This was fueled by a childhood in which I spent a lot of time in Europe because my dad had a career outside of farming that took him beyond the United States. It became second nature for me to travel and explore — to leave home for long periods of time and then settle back into life on the ranch — a lifestyle I favored throughout my 14-year career in F1 racing.

But over time, it became harder and harder to say goodbye to family and our grove. When I was at home, I spent countless hours with my dad talking about what my role could be when I finally, firmly planted roots in California again. I didn't want to get the job because I was the boss' daughter — I wanted to earn the position because I could bring value to the operation and contribute something worthwhile. When I finally moved home and started working on the ranch, I experienced in quick succession a roller coaster of challenges — the Thomas Fire, the birth of my son and a health scare that threatened to turn everything upside down. Fast forward five years later — here I am, a proud 6<sup>th</sup> generation farmer and 4<sup>th</sup> generation avocado grower, walking

the groves learning from my dad and teaching my son. Those are the very best of days.

As much as I have worked to bring value to my family's farm, I've also tried very hard to find a place in our industry where I can make a difference and a positive impact. Right now, that "place" happens to be a seat at the California Avocado Commission's leadership table. The most valuable lesson about leadership I have learned came as a member of Class 54 of the California Ag Leadership program and that is you *don't have to be at the head of the table to be leading*. There is a role for all of us in advocating for California avocados — particularly now. I know times are difficult for growers — with rising input costs and volatile returns it is challenging to remain economically sustainable. And an increasingly volatile climate, changing global inspection processes and the uncertainty of USMCA negotiations weigh heavily on all of us. With obstacles this large, the most powerful thing we can do is face them together and speak with one voice leaning on the strength of our numbers and our commitment to grow the best fruit on the planet. No matter where you farm, the size of your operation or how you manage your groves, we all should be able to unite on issues that impact the viability and sustainability of our industry.

So, I encourage each of you to remember that just because you are not

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on the board or sitting on a committee does not mean you don't have a role to play. Stay involved and stay abreast of the issues by following the Commission's updates. Take every opportunity to mix with other farmers, community leaders and government representatives and *tell our story*. So many people are so far removed from what farming means and who we are that we need to take advantage of any chance we have to share our experiences, how deeply we care for the land and how important it is to us to produce safe and healthy avocados.

As your new Chair, I am committed to listening to our grower base and I want to make the best, informed decisions I can when I am in the boardroom, and you can play an active role in that.

Ultimately, what I love about being a grower is that no day is ever the same. There is so much that is outside of our control and so much we have yet to learn about growing avocados. It's both a challenge and an opportunity. The same can be said for our industry. If each of us can commit, in some manner, to getting involved and capitalizing on the strength of our numbers and our commitment to the land and our fruit, together we can learn how to more effectively grow our avocados, advocate for our industry and face uncertainty with strength and unity. 