

By Rachael Laenen
Board of Directors Chair

The Joy and Challenge of Farming Avocados

A family member recently asked me what it is that I love about farming. I answered quickly and enthusiastically, but since then, I have thought a lot about the question and the answer. There is something incredibly special about growing avocados in California. We get to steward the land in a way that naturally promotes healthy soils because of the deep leaf mulch. We grow a safe and healthy piece of fruit that is truly delicious and I'm proud of every bin of fruit that leaves our ranch. We're growing a super food loaded with nutrition and people love it. Something that's good for you *and* tastes good? The avocado is a unicorn!

But growing avocados in California is hard. A wise man once said it's a fool who chooses to be business partners with Mother Nature. Because of cold snaps, high heat events and relentless Santa Ana winds, our fate is not truly our own. The challenges presented by Mother Nature are coupled by those of a competitive global market. We have little to no control over our input costs and we are at the mercy of our suppliers, supply and the global environment. Added to that, we are price takers because we grow a perishable commodity. When our beautiful fruit is ready, the clock starts ticking and we say, "How much will you pay me for this?" That price almost entirely depends on how much fruit is available in the market and how much other countries are sending to the U.S.

So why do we do it? Why do we love it? For me, it's because every day I can be a better farmer than I was yesterday. We know so little about growing avocados that there is plenty of opportunity for improvement. There are so many little things we can do to improve — technologies that help us irrigate with precision and meet the trees' exact needs; evolving and proactive fertility programs; comprehensive canopy management strategies; and harvest plans that maximize size and quality. These farming investments and decisions allow us to raise our yields, do more with less and ensure the fruit we're putting into the market is high quality premium fruit.

Without a doubt, things are tough. Prices are around 40% of what they were a year ago so breaking even — let alone turning a profit or being able to pay ourselves — seems like a long shot. With import volumes increasing by 15%, we're getting a front row seat to see just how much domestic consumption can increase. The regulatory burden continues to rise and the cost and availability of labor is always an issue. And with the war in Iran, the uncertainty of input costs and the hike at the gas pump makes budgeting a challenge.

In times like this, we need the California Avocado Commission more than ever. I'm pleased the recent referendum results reaffirm that the vast majority of the industry feels the same. I continue to be proud of the work CAC is doing. The Marketing Team is



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making sure California avocados are top of mind through widespread media coverage, including articles focusing on the start of our season, showcasing locally grown messaging and highlighting some awesome women growers in our industry. Our retail marketing directors are meeting with retailers to ensure they are poised to promote our fruit as our volumes ramp up. Our Production Research committee is tackling relevant questions that will help us in the orchard today while looking around the corner to proactively keep us safe in the future. And Ken Melban is eloquently advocating for us in Washington, D.C. to give us the best shot at some meaningful relief.

None of these things, as a farmer, are things I could do on my own. Not even a small group of farmers could run successful farming operations and achieve all of these things. Because of this, I will be forever grateful to our forefathers who had the vision to bring the industry together – growers and packers alike – to create the Commission and charge them to do this hard work for us. I'm grateful for the skilled professionals who work relentlessly on our behalf to deliver against our mandate and mission. As your Chair, I take this responsibility seriously and I know the team does too. It's time to get to work and focus on making the best of this year. 🥑