Chair's Report

By Rachael Laenen
Board of Directors Chair

Challenging and Productive Year



Rachael Laenen

As the 2025-26 crop year comes to a close, I'd like to take a little time to reflect on my first year as Chair of the Commission. It has been a challenging year to say the least, but I'm proud of what we have accomplished and excited about what is to come.

Early in the year, we made the decision to reallocate a significant part of the marketing budget towards retail programs and promotions. This allowed our Retail Marketing Directors to confidently approach the right retailers with valuable programs to promote California avocados. As a result, we were able to run more promotions with more retailers for longer periods of time. Our RMDs also established strong relationships with new customers in new geographies. The initial results of these programs look really positive, and the retailers are already excited about next year. With an anticipated 2026-27 crop of 400 million pounds, the groundwork we established this year will be invaluable as we seek to move 20% more California fruit. This strategy appears to have delivered tangible results this year, and we will continue with the same approach into 2027.

We also took an aggressive approach with trade advocacy in Washington, D.C. With the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement under review, we seized the opportunity to request a seasonal tariff rate quota during California avocado season to help with excessive import volumes from Mexico. Ken Melban has assembled an experienced and well-connected team who are guiding our efforts for maximum impact. I have been approached by industry leaders in other commodities who have seen our advocacy efforts, and they have been highly complimentary, if not a little chagrined they weren't being as proactive! We have gained the attention of the decision makers at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and continue to strengthen our relationships with elected officials who are advocating on our behalf. While it remains an uphill battle, people *are* paying attention. The issues we are raising are serious and have widespread implications, and we will continue this advocacy work on behalf of growers.

I'm grateful for the support of my fellow board members and for choosing me to guide our discussions during this tumultuous year. I am pleased with the robust debates we have had, the breadth of topics we have tackled and the decorum we have maintained. While our decisions have not always been unanimous, I'm grateful we have all proceeded in a supportive way, knowing our actions are always guided by doing what is in the best interest of California avocado growers. In November, the new board will have a different composition based on our redistricting decision. We will have eight growers, representing four districts, two handler representatives and one public member. While there may be fewer of us at the table, the work we do will be no less important and the voices of growers will be no less heard. I'm confident our board can continue to work in a unified direction — where we go, we go together.

And yes, returns this year have been rough. At an average of 95 cents per pound, it is difficult for many growers to stay in business, let alone turn a profit. While the Commission is working hard on our behalf, there will never be a silver bullet to guarantee profitability. The responsibility falls on each of us to strive for improvement and efficiency every day. To leverage opportunities available through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Resource Conservation District that will help fund irrigation efficiency projects and other tools to enhance productivity. To attend as many meetings and seminars as possible to continue gaining knowledge. To talk to your fellow growers and find out what new things they're trying.

There is no guarantee next year will be better. But it isn't certain it will be worse either. As a farmer, I'm an eternal optimist and always hoping next year will be better. In the meantime, I'll be out cleaning ditches and drains to prepare for El Niño!