

By Ken Melban
Vice President, Industry Affairs & Operations

Tackling Grower Challenges: a Big Part of CAC's Agenda



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Looking back at 2023 brings a smile as I recall what was accomplished. Granted, there is always more to do as we work every day to benefit our growers—large and small—but 2023 shows what we as an industry can do when we are focused and results oriented.

Topping the list of urgent issues were water costs, pest quarantines and water quality restrictions; at times all were simultaneously in play.

No doubt, water availability at affordable costs is a big deal throughout California's avocado growing regions. So, when the California Avocado Commission (CAC) learned that two water districts—Rainbow and Fallbrook—were attempting to detach from the San Diego County Water Authority (SDCWA) and its average 10% water cost increases annually, CAC teamed with the districts and hundreds of our growers to make it happen.

The proposed move by the districts to the Eastern Municipal Water District was fought every step of the way by SDCWA and the City of San Diego. That included appearances and testimony by many over the months, including CAC, before the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo), whose approval was required before detachment could occur.

Compelling facts presented during avocado growers' testimony and others ultimately convinced a majority of the LAFCo directors to adopt the proposal, which left only a vote by

residents of the two districts to make the ask a reality...or so we thought. The winning vote eventually occurred in late 2023 but it almost did not happen, which returns us to the opposition by SDCWA and the City of San Diego.

Having lost the LAFCo vote, the opposition turned to the State Capitol and caused the introduction of legislation that would have greatly expanded and urbanized the eligible voter pool to include all voters in San Diego County—rather than limiting the pool to voters from the two relevant districts. The legislation also included an urgency provision (requiring a two-thirds vote in the Senate and Assembly) that would allow the proposal to become law when signed by the Governor (which would have occurred around September 2023) rather than becoming law on January 1, 2024, which occurs with passage of majority vote legislation.

The opposition's strategy was to change the law ahead of the pending vote with full expectations that the new voter pool would oppose detachment and thereby lock our growers into paying present and likely future untenable SDCWA water rates. So, what to do?

CAC and the districts did the only thing they could do. We went to the State Capitol, too. Further, CAC organized growers throughout "avocado country" resulting in a petition signed by more than 300 of our growers and delivered to legislators in their districts and Sacramento. Over time, our message against offensive power politics

and economic harm to our growers and their communities broke through and that changed everything.

Support for the legislation began to dwindle and ultimately the vote count did as well. At some point, the opposition's vote count showed that they could achieve a majority vote in both Houses of the legislature but not two-thirds. With that, the question of how to proceed shifted and the opposition accepted reality. The urgency clause was removed, the majority vote legislation passed, which the Governor signed, and it became law January 1, 2024, but too late to stop the vote approving detachment.

On a different front, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) mistakenly listed Hass avocados as a host for Oriental Fruit Fly and Queensland Fruit Fly thereby subjecting the fruit to quarantine restrictions. This action took place despite the fact that Hass avocados are not listed as a host for Mexican Fruit Fly or Mediterranean Fruit Fly.

CAC petitioned and USDA corrected this error but what if this had slipped through the cracks? Multiple pesticide treatments; restricted movement of the crop from groves; and economic distress to our growers, their labor force and communities? Our work

is not done, however. CAC continues to engage with USDA to remove the listing of GEM and Lamb-Hass avocados as host crops.

The Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board got our attention as well last year with its proposed limitations for discharges from irrigated agricultural lands, which would impact avocado growers and many other farmers in the region.

Coordinating with the Ventura County Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business, and other likeminded groups, CAC stepped up and supported the collective, common-sense message in defense of our avocado growers. The highlights included a laundry list of bureaucratic overreach driven in part by little, if any, understanding of agriculture and farming practices.

The following are a few examples of what we are fighting:

The total maximum daily load (TMDL) of additives to the soil for farming purposes will be imposed on a given area outlined on a map rather

than specific properties already subject to existing TMDL limits. This arbitrary approach to decision making surely accommodates regulators but creates real risk of victimizing our growers.

Requires farmers to install best management practices even if such practices are deemed unnecessary or infeasible by technical experts and does not make allowance for the time needed to comply.

Our avocado growers are as unique as the land they farm with hill-sides, intersecting roads and valleys that often require specialized farming practices. There is little recognition of this operational diversity as the Regional Board and staff look to adopt and enforce inflexible rules — in effect applying a one-size-fits-all framework. This must be avoided if possible.

There it is—a sample of challenges we faced in 2023, some of which will carry over to 2024 even as other issues surface and require our attention. Stay tuned. 🥑

EXECUTIVE NOTES

By Terry Splane

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- We're getting back to our roots, literally. Or to be more exact – your roots. -Building on the locally grown message, California growers and groves will take on a prominent role in California avocado communications.
- And speaking of California, the state's iconic shaped outline will have unmistakable visibility in much of the new creative. This simple state visual is powerful in its presence, and a picture is worth a thousand words.
- We will continue to focus on Now

in Season messaging. Our objective will be to turn this statement from a fact into a sense of urgency and excitement for consumers to get to their retailer or restaurant and buy these amazing California avocados, NOW!

There's plenty more to tell, but I'll stop there. I'd rather show you in the next edition, so be on the lookout. Suffice it to say, we're extremely energized to launch all this newness beginning in a few short months. And we can't wait for you to see it too! 🥑



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CaliforniaAvocadoGrowers.com/Commission/your-representatives