

# Commission Meets with Rep. Duncan Hunter

By Ken Melban  
*Director, Issues Management*

Congressman Duncan Hunter and three of his staff members joined commission representatives on August 22 in Fallbrook for an avocado grove visit and packing facility tour.

Rep. Hunter, serving his third term in Congress, previously represented California's 52<sup>nd</sup> District. After redistricting he was elected to represent California's 50<sup>th</sup> District, which includes parts or all of Escondido, Fallbrook, and Temecula. With the significant avocado production in Rep. Hunter's new district, he and his staff were very interested in learning more about avocados. A large part of the discussion was on immigration, and the congressman seemed keenly aware of the importance of comprehensive immigration reform that will address the needs of agriculture. "Congressman Hunter listened to our concerns and understands what we need," said avocado grower Jerome Stehly. "His drive to want to get the problem resolved and get a bill to the floor was very encouraging."

Rep. Hunter said the border needs to be secure and then he would fully support an agricultural guest worker program. Obviously, our industry is feeling the strains of a broken immigration system, and attendees like Jaime Serrato, both a farmer and labor contractor, stressed the absolute urgency of the situation by saying, "I don't think most people understand how difficult it is to find ag labor or how serious the impact on the economy will be if something isn't done soon."

That evening Rep. Hunter hosted a standing room only town hall meeting in Fallbrook. Commission staff was in



*Rep. Hunter was eager to hear about avocado production.*

attendance to hear that the overwhelming majority of comments from attendees were focused on immigration reform. There was strong representation from supporters and opponents, with participants at times shouting at each other, illustrating the tremendous divide that exists on this issue. The time spent with Congressman Hunter earlier in the day proved valuable as he was able to refute some of the comments suggesting undocumented workers in agriculture take jobs from the unemployed and that farmers don't pay enough. In response to a man who was vehemently opposed to any type of immigration reform, Hunter replied,



areas like tax relief or federal agency funding for grower improvements in irrigation technologies, Rep. Hunter could definitely provide important influence. Based on our interaction with him and his staff, it appears the commission will have an ally in Congress.

The commission will continue to work with members of Congress to ensure the collective voice of California's 5,000 avocado growers is heard loud and clear. 🥑

"I was in an avocado grove today, and I didn't see anyone lining up to work those jobs, and it's not because they don't pay enough considering they make \$15-20 an hour."

After the grove visit, CAC staff was able to spend three more hours with the congressman and have in-depth discussions not only on labor, but on other issues like water. "The visit was great and served to reiterate the fact that the region's avocado growers are an economic asset, supplying jobs and producing a product that millions of Americans enjoy," said Rep. Hunter. "It was a good opportunity to see firsthand the inner-workings of the avocado industry and meet some local growers and distributors who are among the hardest working professionals around."

As the commission's campaign for affordable water continues, no stone is being left unturned, including determining if there are any options at the federal level. As of yet nothing has been identified, but if a possible pathway for federal assistance is discovered, it is likely Rep. Hunter could play an important role. In

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