

HAB Continues to Represent Entire Industry

By Tim Linden

Emiliano Escobedo, who is the executive director of the Hass Avocado Board (HAB), said even though U.S. growers and importers pay an assessment fee to the group, many are a bit confused about what they do.

"People are familiar with us because they pay their dues, but I don't think a lot of people can actually define what HAB does," he said.

First and foremost, Escobedo said HAB represents all Hass avocados sold in the United States regardless of point of origin. In fact, the board has changed its approach a bit over the years and now it tends to work on industry and marketing issues that are very generic in nature and not tied to any specific point of origin. For example, conducting nutrition research on the Hass avocado is one of its main activities. "Nutrition is always in season. It doesn't matter where the avocado comes from," he quipped.

The Hass Avocado Board was founded about a decade ago after the passage of the Hass Avocado Promotion, Research and Information Act by the U.S. Congress in 2000. The board consists of 12 members, including growers and importers, and assesses most all Hass avocados consumed in the United States at the rate of 2.5 cents per pound. Most of that money (85 percent) is rebated to the specific promotion board representing the avocado's point of origin. For example, the California Avocado Commission receives 85 percent of the assessments paid on California production. Similar boards have been established for the promotion of avocados produced in Mexico, Chile and Peru. While each of those groups tends to run promotions touting their point of origin, HAB does not. In fact, it does not engage in direct product promotion at all.

While marketing, promotion, research and dissemination of information are all allowed under the act establishing HAB, Escobedo said that the biggest chunk of the roughly \$6 million HAB budget goes to nutrition research. For the past several years, HAB has been aggressively funding studies to help grow the body of science around the consumption of avocados. In fact, Escobedo said never has that effort received more attention than in the last few years. "From 1960 to 2009, there were 23 nutritional studies on avocados published. Eight of those were funded by the industry. Right now we have eight clinical trials going on and each of them should be published by 2015."

By then Escobedo is expecting the link between good health and avocados to be clearly made. Those clinical studies revolve around several themes including good heart health, weight management and diabetes control. As the link is being made, HAB will and is engaging in what Escobedo calls nutrition marketing. "Our vision is to have a single minded campaign to drive avocado consumption by drawing attention to the nutritional benefits of increased consumption."

He repeated that HAB is the perfect vehicle for this type of campaign because "we know the science and we don't have to worry about marketshare because good nutrition is always in season."

The HAB executive believes the nutrition campaign should be conducted without regard to country of origin and in a unified avocado voice. "We are creating easy to understand messages that we can put in a toolbox that we will make available to our member organizations."

Largely because of the good nutritional story that avocados can tell, Escobedo is very bullish about the continued growth of the avocado market. He said both the aging of the American population as well as its increasing ethnicity should also add to increased consumption.

As HAB celebrates its 10th anniversary, Escobedo said the entire industry should be very proud of what has been accomplished over that decade. "When we started, the goal was to expand avocado consumption throughout the United States and increase consumption. We have expanded tremendously both geographically and in volume. Today people in New York and Miami and all over the country consume avocados."

But he said HAB is not the same organization as it was 10 years ago because it has a different approach with its nutrition emphasis. To signify that, the board has adopted a new logo with new graphics. But while the approach is different and so is the road map to get there, the goal is still the same: increase the consumption of Hass avocados. 