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Immigration Reform Takes Center Stage

During the week of June 10, I traveled to Washington, D.C., for meetings with congressional members and federal agency staff on a variety of issues impacting the California avocado industry. The trip proved to be timely as the primary purpose was to advocate in support of pending legislation on Immigration Reform and the Farm Bill. Below is an update on those issues and others, based on the most current information at the time of this writing.

Farm Bill Fails House Vote

With the extension of the Farm Bill (bill) due to expire on September 30, 2013, on June 20th the House of Representatives failed to pass a bill by a vote of 195 to 234. The failure in the House to move a bill into conference occurred a mere ten days after the Senate passed their version on June 10th. Although bipartisan support within the House was hoped for, in the end members of both parties voted in opposition. Within the Republican Party, the primary disagreement centered on proposed production limits on dairy producers. House Speaker John Boehner, who typically does not vote on legislation, voted for an amendment that would remove dairy production limits from the bill. In a rare “dear colleague” letter, Boehner wrote, “By bringing some free market reforms to our dairy programs, this amendment will help our economy grow, protect farmers and families, and save taxpayers an additional \$15 million over the changes in the underlying bill.” The proposed amendment failed, causing many in the majority to oppose the bill. The concern for

Democrats was the level of cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), also known as the food stamp program. According to Rep. Barbara Lee (Calif.), “The [Farm Bill] reauthorization includes more than \$20 billion in harmful and fiscally irresponsible cuts to the food stamp program, our Nation’s first line of defense against hunger. Not only is cutting SNAP morally wrong, it’s economically bankrupt. Cuts to nutrition programs will cost the government more money in the long run, but also it is just probably the worst thing that I have ever seen proposed.” There is some chance the House will take the bill up again in the near term, but if a bill is not passed before the August recess it will become even more difficult. “If we don’t get the bill done this summer or early this fall, if we get into next year it’s going to be very difficult to get it done in an election year,” said Collin Peterson, House Agriculture Committee Ranking Member.

At stake for avocado growers is funding for specialty crops in areas such as the Specialty Crop Research Initiative and Clean Plant Network. Funding for those programs is not part of the baseline funding, and therefore is not continued under any extension. The Commission will continue to work with Congress for the authorization of a new bill.

Immigration Reform Legislation

On June 11, the Senate voted overwhelmingly, 82-15, to proceed with the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, and began debating the bill and proposed amendments.



Senator Charles Schumer (NY), member of the Senate Gang of Eight, and Ken Melban discuss immigration reform.

The debate, expected to last for a few weeks, may result in a Senate vote before the July 4 recess. The architects of the bill, known as the “Gang of Eight,” are aiming for a lofty goal of 70 votes in the Senate. Their thinking is simple- show a strong level of bi-partisan support and thereby improves the chances of a divided Congress passing immigration reform legislation. Senator Marco Rubio, one of the authors of the bill, stated, “The goal here is not to pass a bill out of the Senate. The goal here is to reform our immigration laws. And that requires something that can pass the House, the Senate, and be signed by the president.”

House conservatives are primarily concerned over two parts of the legislation: providing a pathway to citizenship and border language that they consider not strict enough.

Within the House an a la carte approach has been suggested that will address immigration changes through individual legislative pieces rather than a comprehensive bill. Agriculture advocates are concerned this course will not lead to a favorable outcome because it will fail to establish a system that guarantees a stable ag workforce. As with the Farm Bill legislation, if immigration reform isn't passed before the August recess the chances for success become less likely.

Food Safety

Over the last few months more and more California avocado growers have become GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certified, with the amount of certified California avocado acreage approaching thirty percent. At the same time, handlers are reporting a rise in inquiries from retailers and food service on the availability of GAP certified fruit. Just recently, a major retailer announced they will require that all fresh produce be GAP-compliant by September, 2013. Once the comment period for the draft Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Rule closes in September, it will only be a matter of time before it becomes mandatory for growers to demonstrate their compliance with the FSMA standards.

Growers who elect to become GAP certified under the CAC-GAP program will be able to demonstrate compliance with the FSMA standards. Becoming GAP certified hasn't necessarily meant big changes for growers, and in many cases improvements in their documentation has been the biggest adjustment.

I would encourage you to learn more about the CAC-GAP program by reviewing our website (www.californiaavocadogrowers.com/gap/) or sending an email asking for more information on GAP to cac.iaf@avocado.org. As a reminder the commission is offering a rebate to growers of



up to \$300 for actual audit costs (dependent upon availability of funds). Complete guidelines may be found here: (www.californiaavocadogrowers.com/cac-gap-incentive-rebate-resources/).

Water Pricing Campaign

The commission continues to pursue a solution to the escalating cost of water in the Southern California region through a number of strategic activities. Commission representatives are engaged in ongoing outreach to Metropolitan Water District (MWD) board members and staff and regularly attend their board and committee meetings. In addition, over the last year avocado grove tours and one-on-one meetings with MWD representatives have been held. The commission also participates in water meetings and workshops, and recently the commission shared our story at the OC Water Summit. The Summit was attended primarily by staff and board members from Southern California water agencies, and each of the nearly five-hundred attendees were provided with a bag containing two avocados and an insert (see page 20). The objective of these activities is to educate those who set water rates on the benefits agriculture provides to the region, with the ultimate goal of seeing solutions implemented that combat the increasing cost of ag water.

At the CAC Board meeting in May additional public affairs activities were approved for the purpose of intensifying the reach of our story. So what is our story? Well, our story

is straightforward: That agriculture, in addition to playing a pivotal role in the history of Southern California, is very much alive and provides tremendous economic, environmental, and societal value. We communicate how agriculture, for years, has adapted to increasing water costs through the implementation of technologies that improve efficiencies, and that we are, as a whole, pretty darn efficient in our water use!

Also, that the commission has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to fund research, for example, to develop a salinity resistant rootstock. And finally, we are not afraid to speak candidly and say that the future of agriculture in Southern California is inextricably linked to controlling the cost of water. That we must have affordable water for agriculture!

Although different ideas have been floated, unfortunately no "silver bullet" has yet been identified. However, we have received commitments from some of the decision makers to work with us in determining what, if any, price relief opportunities may exist. One idea is that of Take or Pay agreements, which you can learn more about in the Take or Pay article in this issue (page 23). We will keep you posted as the Water Pricing Campaign continues. While the challenge before us is difficult, many of us remain optimistic that a solution will be identified that works for both agriculture and the water agencies. I believe this expression captures it well- "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." 🥑



THE FUTURE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE DEPENDS ON AFFORDABLE WATER

WATER is arguably the most precious resource in today's farming operations. California Avocado growers have implemented numerous practices throughout the years to utilize water efficiently.

THE CALIFORNIA AVOCADO INDUSTRY IS DEDICATED TO IDENTIFYING A SOLUTION FOR THE ESCALATING COSTS OF WATER, WHICH HAVE INCREASED 234% IN THE PAST 11 YEARS.

- **Advanced technologies and modernization:** To improve water use efficiencies, California Avocado growers have implemented a variety of technologies, including reverse osmosis, high-density groves and managed tree heights.
- **Research:** California Avocado growers have dedicated millions of dollars to fund research, with one of the goals to develop salt-tolerant varieties of avocado trees.
- **Environmental benefits:** Avocado groves help improve air quality, provide a barrier to fire spread and reduce urban sprawl.



- **Value to the community:** Southern California agriculture and related businesses contribute \$40 billion and 450,000 jobs to the local economy, and provide access to safe, locally grown produce, including avocados.*

- **Proactive and progressive:** The California Avocado industry has been instrumental in telling the story of California avocados at water meetings and workshops, promoting the importance of an affordable agricultural water rate for more than three decades.

THE FUTURE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE AND THE AVOCADO INDUSTRY DEPEND ON AN AFFORDABLE WATER RATE.

To learn more about Hand Grown In California avocados, visit californiaavocado.com



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