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## Drought, the Media, and “Premium Californians”

As the 2015 California avocado season finishes up, most growers would like to plan for some well-deserved time off. Unfortunately, in light of the challenges facing the avocado industry, the saying “there’s no rest for the weary” seems all too apropos.

This definitely applies to your Commission’s Industry Affairs staff. We work year-round to advocate on your behalf on a plethora of issues, ranging from the invasive polyphagous shot hole borer (PSHB)/Fusarium Dieback pest complex that threatens California’s avocado production to the Food and Drug Administration’s pilot program testing fresh avocado for bacterial contamination. But one issue continues to overshadow all others — the lack of water.

Fortunately, from an issues management perspective, the fact that the drought’s impact reaches beyond farming is “good” in that it has generated a level of unparalleled societal awareness concerning the importance of a stable water supply. There also seems to be increasing public support for improving our state’s water storage and conveyance systems. (If we could just get the same support from our state and federal legislators!)

Unfortunately, this increase in societal awareness has also resulted

in a pointed public policy debate concerning the amount of water used by agriculture as compared to residential and environmental usage. Depending on how the data is calculated, statewide average water use is roughly 50 percent environmental, 40 percent agricultural, and 10 percent urban (Public Policy Institute of California). Water use calculations that do not count the environmental flows for the preservation of endangered species report that agriculture uses 80 percent of the water. We strongly disagree with this model and refute it whenever possible.

In my opinion, two prominent factors are driving this debate. First is the incorrect public impression that agricultural water users were given a “pass” on mandatory water reductions. In April, Governor Brown issued a statement asking Californians to reduce water use by 25 percent. In May, the State Water Resources Control Board issued a mandatory — up to 36 percent — emergency water use reduction for all residential and business customers. The Control Board’s decision appeared to exclude agricultural customers, although those who are customers of water agencies that serve residential and industrial customers have to comply with the mandatory reductions. The only agencies

exempted from the emergency order were those that are solely agricultural water agencies.

Second, there are pockets within California’s central valley that do not have running water. That’s right — California, a state in one of the most prosperous countries in the world, has residents living in third-world conditions. This commands tremendous public attention and causes people to pause and realize they could end up in the same situation.

As long as mandatory emergency water-use restrictions remain in place and experts continue to claim this is the worst drought in history, some communities have to exist without running water and media coverage will remain intense. Over the last few months we’ve seen multiple attacks on agriculture’s water use, with some stories specifically listing avocado production. We are contacted by reporters (print, radio and television) an average of 10-15 times a month asking questions like, “How is the drought impacting California avocado farmers?” and “How much water does it take to grow an avocado?” or “Will this result in either a shortage of California avocados or an increase in price?”

Obviously water use in agriculture is more complicated than simply

boiling it down (pun intended) to “X” number of gallons are needed to produce “Y” pounds of fruit, but that is the extent of most media reports. What isn’t mentioned is that water for agriculture also helps recharge ground supplies, provides jobs, preserves open space and helps improve air quality. And let’s not forget that agriculture feeds people!

Media coverage of this topic can be extremely frustrating and we understand the impulse to respond with more accurate information. But how would that clarification be portrayed by the media and how would it be interpreted by the public? How will people respond to the fact that avocados only need 50 gallons of water per pound instead of 150 gallons? Although that may be the case, trying to clarify the information will only likely result in perpetuating the story. So we look to redirect the focus. Our message is clear, “Although the drought has impacted some of the farmers, overall the industry is coping and maintaining its productivity.” We explain that this “season’s supply is somewhat typical based on alternate bearing and that we do not anticipate supply problems or drought-related price impacts for next season.”

Yes, you heard right. We intentionally mention the price of California avocados and even note the increasing price is not related to the drought. As you know, the Commission has been diligently working to establish California avocados as the premium avocado. But premium comes at a price and it’s important our customers realize the price of premium California avocados will remain stable – not drop – even if an El Niño event occurs this winter (fingers crossed!) and the current drought conditions are diminished. We want our customers, the “premium Californians,” to realize we provide hand-grown premium

avocados – avocados that are worth the price paid. In every interview we work to ensure the cost of California avocados is not associated with the drought but with their premium quality.

Tom Bellamore, in his “Message from the President” column in this issue, announced that the Commission has just selected a new ad agency and we are now poised to take our marketing effort to the next level. The target customers — these “premium Californians” — may or may not live in California, but they have an emotional connection to California and when given the opportunity they will purchase California avocados. They understand that premium products are worth their price.

One last point. When responding to the media, we make certain to communicate how the avocado industry as a whole uses water effi-

ciently, utilizing the latest available technologies (e.g. micro-sprinklers, soil-tensiometers, etc.). In addition, we discuss the industry’s transition to higher density plantings, our ongoing research concerning salinity resistant rootstocks and our exploration of potential new water efficiency technologies. If you’re interested in learning more about how you can improve your irrigation systems, see Dr. Tim Spann’s article on page 20 entitled “Using Soil Moisture Sensors to Improve Irrigation Efficiency.”

Hopefully this multi-faceted issues management example serves to illustrate that all of the Commission’s activities, from marketing and production research to industry affairs, are synchronized with one goal in mind: to provide you, the California avocado grower, with the best possible outcome — rain or shine. 🥑

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