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## Commission Considers Industry Sustainability Certification

Interest in sustainability continues to grow with key California avocado retailers and consumers. Sustainability assesses the impacts, both positive and negative, the production of a product has on the planet and people. In a past California Avocado Commission funded study, more than 100 laws and regulations were identified that California avocado growers comply with in areas such as worker health, safety and wages, along with environmental protections. The legal standards in California provide some of the highest, if not the highest, standards for growing avocados in the world.

Unfortunately, the high standards farmers maintain here in California are not widely known. Furthermore, in some instances, practices used in other parts of the world have negatively influenced perceptions of California farming practices. A blatant example of this is child labor. California has significant protections against child labor, yet sustainability questionnaires from major retailers continue to ask questions about the use of child labor in Califor-

nia production.

This disconnect makes a strong case for the Commission proactively sharing the California avocado industry's sustainability story. A story that demonstrates our growers are the original environmentalists. That illustrates how the legacy of your farm is completely, and inextricably, linked to the protections of the land you farm and the people you employ — without either of which your future is nonexistent.

The nutritional and health benefits of California avocados are broadly understood by our target consumers. It's a fact — California avocados are healthy. But the value of purchasing and consuming a California avocado doesn't stop there, in fact that's just the beginning. The California avocado industry provides many other benefits to the local community and surrounding environment. Jobs are created, carbon is sequestered, and green space is preserved by the California avocado industry, just to name a few.

We have a tremendous opportunity to strengthen the California avo-

cado brand appeal by highlighting these non-health benefits. Consumers should not only feel good about purchasing California avocados for their wellbeing, but also for the benefits each California avocado purchase provides to the communities they are grown in and the planet they are grown on.

Demonstrating our sustainability practices gives us the opportunity to tell our story in a way that supports increased loyalty for buying the "locally produced" California avocado supply. And it is a message that will resonate beyond our consumers. By investing in sustainability messaging, we will have new opportunities to educate elected officials, agency personnel, influencers, and maybe even some environmentalists, on the peripheral benefits California avocado farming provides to California.

### **NO NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL**

Recently, Commission representatives met with Sonoma County Winegrape Commission staff and members

to gain a better understanding of their very successful sustainability program. Launched in 2014, with the “bold commitment – to become the most sustainable winegrowing region in the world,” they have achieved certified sustainability on 99% of their 60,000 acres through a third-party program. Quite impressive.

Those visits provided us with a clear understanding of the opportunity before us and how to move forward. Accordingly, we are working with a third-party program to identify the many Beneficial Management Practices (BMPs) within the California avocado industry and develop a certification process. Based on our previous work we have outlined a series of avocado growing features and their benefits to the public and community. These features include:

- Environmentally Friendly Farming Practices such as no till, erosion control, water conservation and regulatory program participation
- Ensuring Worker Well Being efforts including compliance with state and federal regulations, overtime pay, breaks, field sanitation, personal protective equipment and health and safety training
- Contributing to Healthy Communities initiatives including air quality and climate benefits, orchards as fire breaks and open space
- Maintaining Economic Viability

We are now in the beginning stages of working with a third-party sustainability program to tailor a program that works for California avocados. Once a program is established, the third-party certification program will assist growers in documenting and certifying their sustainable practices. Yes, there will be a cost, but in talking with Sonoma growers it typically runs from around \$500-\$1000.

## DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABILITY CERTIFICATION PROGRAM FOR CALIFORNIA AVOCADOS

**Environment:** Evaluate BMPs in use to address environmental effects of avocado farms including maintaining water quality, conserving water, chemicals used and IPM/cultural measures used, chemical storage, mix and load and application measures, soil conservation/erosion control, habitats and existing regulatory programs and other features as needed. A set of BMPs would be completed along with a farm plan template to document practices on each site and identify needed BMPs. Growers will be involved in completing this step.

**Workforce and Community:** The third-party auditor uses a relatively simple but comprehensive template for documenting labor practices and benefits to workers and communities. This template can be modified to appropriately reflect the California avocado industry.

**Sustainable Business Practices:** A template for sustainable business practices also is part of the certification. This template will be reviewed with individual growers and adjusted as needed.

**Climate:** In addition, the third-party auditor can conduct separate climate certification called the Climate Adaptation Certification, which could be included with the program or offered as an option to interested growers. It uses sophisticated modeling to document and quantify greenhouse gas emissions and carbon sequestration. Growers in Sonoma have been very supportive of this certification as it allows flexibility

in land management and sound science to reach climate goals.

**Certification:** Typically, the certification provides a review of the farm plan, BMPs currently in use and those that will be added and a quick visit to the farm. The certification is a collaborative process using independent auditors. Each site is recertified every five years.

**Logo and Marketing:** The certifier provides a logo for marketing, labeling and other uses to all operations with up-to-date certifications through a no cost license agreement. In Sonoma, they also have metal enameled certification signs that growers purchase and proudly display on their fence or other location.

For those of you who remember the rollout of the Commission’s food safety program in 2011-12, you are likely thinking, “here we go again.” Well, to some degree, yes. Much of this is similar in terms of making sure you get credit for what you are already doing in the grove.

However, sustainability certification is much more than going through and checking boxes. This is our opportunity to ensure the California avocado industry puts its best foot forward in educating buyers, consumers, future consumers, politicians, influencers, and others on just how much California avocado farming is contributing to California’s future sustainability. Regardless of your opinion on sustainability, our consumers increasingly care. We can no longer rely on others to tell our story.

The time is now for California avocados to build and then tell our sustainability story – California avocado purchases are healthy for you, support the community you live in, and improve the planet you live on. 🍷