

Report from Australia – An Update

Don Lavers

Director-at-Large, California Avocado Society; Chairman, Varieties Committee, Australian Avocado Growers Federation; Chairman, Atherton Tableland Avocado Growers Association



Greetings.

As we move into the 'nineties, the Australian avocado producer views the highlights of the last decade in terms of good and bad news.

The bad news is that costs have been escalating and prices have stayed much the same or declined, and there is every indication that the cost-price squeeze may not get better. I suggest that this problem may be common to most producing countries.

The good news is that communication has improved and this, combined with the improved technology that goes with it, is the way an industry can lift its performance. Members of the industry throughout the world should be proud of the way communication has moved forward so decisively, allowing free exchange of information between growers, researchers, extensionists, and marketers.

Much of the credit for this improved communication must go to the California Avocado Society. Its structure, annual meetings, yearbooks, newsletters, and dynamic multicultural membership make it a truly international organization. Easier world travel has encouraged industry members to visit and share experiences with kindred people from other producing countries.

World Avocado Congress I in South Africa was a giant step forward in the exchange of information, and this has set the standard for World Avocado Congress II in 1991, which looks like another communication milestone. People who attended Australia's "Conference 89" on the Queensland Gold Coast will have been aware of the international flavor achieved in an industry that, although small, aspires to high standards of research and extension.

We can confidently hope that communication will continue to improve through the 'nineties. Perhaps we can look forward to the time when research priorities will be considered on a world basis, and particular areas of research are allocated to countries with special facilities or problems.

Technical workers may be able to link up monthly by fax or computer to monitor progress pending a full report at the next world congress.

The Industry

In spite of pre-winter drenching rains in some of the main producing areas for the second year in a row, Australian production continued to expand at nearly 15 % per year, reaching a record 29,000 tonnes, or 63.8 million pounds. There was the usual slump in prices during early- and mid-winter, when a surge of production traditionally coincides with a sagging market. People in the industry are wondering how far winter prices will fall in future years when there is no natural disaster to limit supply.

The record rains resulted in tree losses from "drowning" and encouraged the spread of Phytophthora root rot, although prompt and strategic use of phosphite tree injections kept losses of trees and fruit well below the ruinous levels of 1973. Because of the protracted wet, many producers could not apply protective fungicides to their maturing crop, so that the quality of some of the thin-skinned varieties on the market, notably Fuerte, was disappointing. This problem of fruit quality seemed to have a depressing effect on sales generally.

A market survey carried out by Kevin Smith and Scott Turner during the last fourteen months has shown that, while occasional users buy more avocados in summer, medium and heavy users tend to buy all year 'round. Most users like the taste very much, have a few basic methods of serving, and prefer to buy their avocados either hard or a combination of hard and ripe. A small number of users were concerned that avocados are fattening, and a very small number (less than 5 %) reduced their intake because they believed avocados contain cholesterol. A substantial number of users had been dissatisfied at some time with the quality of avocados they had purchased.

Non-users, who formed 30-40% of the shoppers interviewed, were mainly older people or from the lower income working areas. When asked the reason for not buying, they said either they didn't like the taste, didn't know how to use them, thought they were fattening, thought they contained cholesterol, or were too expensive.

Most retailers offered fruit of mixed ripeness, allowing consumers to sort and select, acknowledging that this practice leads to shop damage, wastage, and customer dissatisfaction.

This important survey will continue during the 1990 season, and the final report will be delivered at "Conference 90" in July; but the work so far clearly highlights some industry priorities for the future:

1. To educate consumers on how to select and store; how to recognize varieties; how to prepare and serve, particularly as a fresh, uncooked accompaniment to hot foods; e.g., soups, stews, casseroles, and pastas.

2. To educate retailers on buying, ripening, storing, displaying, and generally giving customers what they want.
3. To educate growers and packers on an industry wide quality assurance program.

Marketing

Faced with the need for growers to improve their marketing power and to raise fruit quality, an interesting marketing innovation has emerged. Financially assisted by the Commonwealth Government through its Marketing Skills Program, a group of larger packers and growers have formed themselves into a marketing structure called "Target 90" under the leadership of Nambour grower Stewart Penny. The aim is to market 30% of the east coast crop under a common brand name and with uniform assured quality. This will benefit growers through better returns on the domestic market and, as well, will encourage exports and processing which, to date, have accounted for a very small fraction of Australia's throughput. Another big benefit will be the encouragement it will give to small and medium growers, who now pack independently; to group together into grower controlled packing units so they can obtain the benefits of the better marketing and returns.

At the time of writing, "Target 90" is moving slowly to accommodate the divergent needs of its scattered members. It is hoped that it will be up and running by its target date - the 1990 season.

The Federation

Delegates who represent the member states on the parent body, the Australian Avocado Growers Federation (AAGF) are as follows:

Secretary	Ross Boyle P.O. Box 19, Brisbane Markets, Q 4106 Phone 07 379 0228/Fax 07 3799283
President	David Rankine
Vice President	Ross Richards
Chairman, Varieties Committee	Don Lavers
Queensland	Dick Armstrong, Don Lavers, Brian Capamagian, Charles Dimes
New South Wales	Warren Meredith, Ashton Gough, Peter Molenaar, Graham Anderson
Victoria (Sunraysia)	Marion Matthews
South Australia	Ross Richards
West Australia	John Galatis

In 1983, the Federation commenced the practice of honoring people who had served the Australian avocado industry with distinction. The following have been recipients of the Federation's Award of Merit:

- 1983 Jim Wilson
1986 John Anderson, Keith Anderson, Pat Chambers, Alec Kidd, Sam McLean,
Matt Walsh
1988 Don Alexander, Ken Pegg, Tony Whiley

Under the direction of the Varieties Committee, the Avocado Nursery Voluntary Accreditation Scheme (ANVAS) has continued successful operation during 1989. ANVAS, through its accredited nurseries, ensures the supply to the industry of planting material that is pathogen free, viroid indexed, and true to type. New rootstocks and scion selections are continually under test and added to the scheme where appropriate. Recent additions have been a new Shepard tree and the outstanding local rootstock, Velvic. Some of the varieties from the University of California breeding program will be included as soon as material becomes available.

There has been some concern about availability of the new patented California varieties to the Australian industry. The Australian Nurseryman's Fruit Improvement Company (ANFIC) has been granted sole rights to distribute UC protected cultivars within Australia, and ANVAS nurseries who handle nearly 100% of the material for commercial planting complain that conditions of entering ANFIC to propagate and distribute this material are too restrictive and too expensive. Discussions are continuing, and it is hoped that a solution will be found that will suit the industry as well as UC and ANFIC.

Plant Variety Rights (PVR) legislation is now in place in Australia, and the varieties Gwen, Whitsell, and Esther have been given provisional protection. This will allow license holders for these varieties to bulk up for commercial distribution.

Research

The following are some of the research projects currently in progress.

- Phytophthora root rot (Ken Pegg and Tony Whiley): etiology and control, interaction of nutrients and pH, distribution of phosphite in the tree, evaluation of clonal rootstocks.
- Evaluation of tolerant rootstocks (Tim Trouchoulis).
- Growth cycle (Tony Whiley): growth and flushing patterns of roots, impact of fruit maturity on productivity, use of plant growth regulators.
- Pest control (Geoff Waite): biological control integrated with chemicals and pheromones.
- Integrated pest management in fruit and vegetable crops (John Hall).
- Preparation of a book entitled, Protect Your Avocados (Roger Broadley).
- Monolepta beetle control (N. Treverow).
- Avocado leafroller control (Bruno Pinese).
- Postharvest (Andrew Jessop): cold storage disinfestation against Queensland fruit fly.
- Preparation of a quality assurance manual (Scott Ledger and Alex Banks).
- Early season avocado quality (Scott Ledger and Sheila Spraggon).

- Controlled atmosphere storage, performance of waxing under CA storage (Scott Ledger).
- Anthracnose (Lindy Rappel): infection processes and control.
- Control of preharvest diseases, storage, and ripening (Ross Fitzell).
- Irrigation scheduling (Terry Campbell).
- Marketing (Kevin Smith and Scott Turner): development of a strategic marketing plan.
- Cholesterol (Ian Coulquhoun): effect of avocados in the diet on blood cholesterol levels.

The following projects are to begin soon.

- Carbohydrate physiology (Tony Whiley): impact of management practices, notably, fruit maturity and time of harvest on carbohydrate levels and tree productivity; role of plant growth regulators on flower initiation.
- Ethylene scrubbing tested under commercial storage (Tony Shorter).
- Pesticide residues after low volume orchard spraying (Alex Banks).