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DIRECTOR'S UPDATE ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN AVOCADO INDUSTRY

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With regard to avocado production in 1997, as was the case during 1996 it was a very disappointing year for the South African industry. Unfavorable weather conditions during the flower and fruit set period— together with hail, wind, and heavy rains in some of the production areas—affected the quality of fruit on the export market. For 1997, an export crop of 6.2 million cartons (4 kg equivalent) was achieved. This followed the low 5.5 million export carton crop for 1996. Both years were far below the 10-11 million cartons potential of the industry.

However, a record crop of 12 million export cartons is predicted for the 1998 season. Feedback on quality of the first arrivals for the 1998 season in Europe has been very positive so far.

EXPORT PROMOTIONS

The South African avocado industry started with a major promotion campaign in 1996 focusing on the United Kingdom, and continued with this campaign during 1997. The industry received good support from the supermarkets and media. The main problem was that the inadequate crop could not supply the market. The test of the industry's investment in promotions will be during 1998.

Support for the French market will also commence during the 1998 season.

SAAGA BOARD AND REGIONAL COMMITTEES

During the 1997 season, the South African Avocado Growers Association board was restructured and Regional Committees were introduced. The purpose of the restructuring of the SAAGA board was to achieve greater grower involvement in a more structured way.

The purpose of SAAGA was redefined, as follows:

- Assisting its members to become more productive. Technical services will be upgraded locally and overseas.
- Funding and coordination of research.
- Creating an information basis on the viability and productivity of the industry.
- Creating a global intelligence information base to ensure regular flow, coordination, and distribution of market information.
- Creating a forum for exporters to coordinate exports.

- Initiating generic promotion locally and overseas.

The South African avocado industry, like other avocado producing countries, is facing major challenges over the short and medium term. Returns for avocados are steadily declining. The challenges from a production point of view are higher productivity and more cost effective farming methods. Research in South Africa is therefore primarily focused on these dimensions. From a marketing point of view, more cost effective logistical procedures and increased consumption are essential.

Canopy management through pruning and growth manipulation techniques must give us the next step to higher yields. The previous breakthrough in South Africa was the control of *Phytophthora* root rot during the late 1970s and early 1980s. We now need a similar breakthrough.

Alternative cultivars can certainly play a major role over the long term. In this regard, the South African industry appreciates the willingness of the California industry to share with us their new selections for evaluation purposes. Such people as Prof. Bob Bergh and Gray Martin will always be respected in South Africa for their contributions toward the selection and breeding of new cultivars. The coordinating role of Dr. Mary Lu Arpaia in managing germ plasm all over the world is also highly appreciated.

It was nice to meet some of the role players of the California avocado industry such as Alva Snider, Mary Lu Arpaia, Len Francis, and Carol Lovatt in New Zealand during the conference in September 1977, We are looking forward to seeing you at the World Avocado Congress in Mexico in 1999.