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Del Mar, California

VII World Avocado Congress 2011 Report



This is a thumb-nail sketch of the VII World Avocado Congress (WAC) held in the tropical city of Cairns, Queensland, Australia, from the 5th to the 9th of September, 2011.

The 2011 conference was held with a background of a world economy trying to recover from the economic meltdown of 2008.

Australia was an exception to this gloomy scenario and was enjoying an unprecedented economic expansion based on China's insatiable demand for its great reserves of coal and iron ore. At the same time, world food prices were rising rapidly. Among food commodities traded worldwide, avocados were enjoying rapidly increasing prices and demand (though not from China since you normally don't stir-fry an avocado!).

At the 7th World Congress, great optimism was in the air. We participants felt that the avocado was at the tipping point of being recognized worldwide as a versatile, delicious and highly nutritious food with great health benefits.

The wide participation from many parts of the world at the conference illustrated this enthusiasm. We had delegates and guests from twenty-two countries.

Country	Number of Delegates
Australia	260
Mexico	116
New Zealand	93
Chile	57
South Africa	54
USA	50
Peru	34
Columbia	18
Spain	16
Israel	13
Brazil	9
Argentina	4
Costa Rica	2
Guatemala	2
Vietnam	2
Italy	1
Kenya	1
Tanzania	1
Ghana	1
India	1
Cuba	1
France	1

Papers given at the conference were divided up into four sections: (1) Pests and Diseases, (2) Cultural Management, (3) Post Harvest and Processing, and (4) Marketing and Supply Chain.

The oral presentations showed great diversity of subject matter and geographical origin. The papers delivered by country were:

Country	Number of papers
Mexico	21
Australia	21
South Africa	18
New Zealand	11
USA	10
Chile	9
Israel	7
Spain	5
Brazil	5
Peru	2
India	1
Ghana	1

Based on these statistics of delegate numbers and papers delivered, I would like to make some comments. Latin Americans showed immense enthusiasm for modern avocado production. We already have Mexico growing and producing 50% of the world's avocados. Many of the younger participants I talked to were attending or wanting to attend the postgraduate agricultural university in Chile for courses mainly dedicated to avocado production. These participants were from Guatemala, Columbia, Peru, etc.. Central and South America have long traditions of growing "Criollo", or local varieties of avocados as shade trees for coffee, cacao, etc. The coffee then goes for export and the avocados are consumed locally. But now, they are talking of pulling out some of their coffee plants and going entirely for Hass avocado production for export to Europe. The coffee is grown on fertile free-draining volcanic soil with very good and well-distributed rainfall. These conditions are ideal for growing Hass, and we can expect more exports to Europe, and potentially to the USA.

As a further comment, a presenter from India mentioned that the country has 1.2 billion inhabitants, the majority of whom are veg-

etarians. With increased prosperity from its rapidly growing economy, diabetes and heart disease are increasing. The author raised the question, could the avocado be a very useful food in a vegetarian culture? I think we know the answer.

As regards to the pre-congress tours of Queensland's avocado producing areas, we enjoyed a feasts laced with generous hospitality, visits to highly productive groves, and original research work. This left ample



time for candid discussions of problems encountered by local growers, such as high cost picking labor provided by wandering “backpackers” at twenty-two Australian dollars (A\$22) per hour (A\$1=US\$1.15 at the time of the conference). Of particular importance we noted the “Bio Security” enforcement used to keep damaging insects out of Australia. Bio Security was administered with as much vigor as Homeland



Security in the USA. There are advantages in growing avocados on an isolated continent like Australia!

During each grove tour and the conference field trip to the Atherton Tablelands, we were generously introduced by the growers and wives to “Smoko,” the original Australian work break for tea and a food snack at 11 am, lovingly named for a cigarette break for those who are still addicted.



This tableland was formed in the well drained soils of an ancient volcano, and is home to many microclimates that allow for the production of a wide variety of crops, and several varieties of avocado. Being in the far northern reaches of the country near latitude 12, the Atherton Tablelands produce the earliest fruit in the Australian markets. This area historically opens the Australian crop season leading with the early fall production of Shepard, a California selection that does extremely well in



the never stop growing climate of tropical Australia. Hass is picked soon thereafter.

After the conference field tour of several groves and packing-houses our Aussie host organizers assured that we experience the local flora and fauna up close, providing us with a tour of a tropical rainforest and zoo. After lunch we were trained in the art of digeradoo playing, and boomerang tossing. If that wasn't enough, we traveled back to Cairns on a now scenic Kuranda Railway built in 1891 to haul the tableland goods to the coastal ports and markets.

The final plenary session was very well attended, as three countries were actively vying to host the upcoming 8th Congress in 2015: Peru, Columbia, and the United States. Each countries representative made a heartfelt presentation to earn the right to hold the next event. The President of the Society, Laura Eggering, along with California Avocado Commission Director Charley Wolk, made an impassioned argument to host WAC VIII in California, in the same year as the Societies' 100th anniversary, but alas, it was not to be.

Following the Plenary session, many of the delegates and guests headed back to the Cairns Convention Center, which had been completely transformed into a wonderful dinner venue. Tributes were given for industry pioneers Hank Brokaw and Jan Toerein. Avocados Australia Chairman Jim Kochi thanked his staff led by CEO Antony Allen for their excellent job in hosting the nearly 1000 participants, and for the wonderful weather we enjoyed the entire week. Reports were that dancing continued into the wee hours!



After saying our goodbyes to many of our new friends, a lucky dozen or so of us then enjoyed a fascinating post-congress tour of the major avocado growing region of New Zealand, aptly named the Bay of

Plenty. We saw how ably growers faced very difficult weather conditions in the spring during fruit set, as cold fronts blew in from Antarctica with no intervening landmass to temper the cold and wind. The growers were encouraged in their travails by beautiful, free-draining volcanic soil and a very well distributed rainfall, plus a lucrative export market in Australia that opened up just as their harvest season began.

As you can see, we had a thought-provoking and stimulating conference. Thanks to the organizers for putting on a wonderful event. Now onward to Peru, the country selected unanimously for the 2015 World Avocado Congress.

**The author is a grower in San Diego County and has served the Board of Directors of the California Avocado Society since 2009. He is currently a member of the Society's International Committee.*