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CALIFORNIA AVOCADO COMMISSION CELEBRATES FEMALE CALIFORNIA GROWERS' IMPACT ON THE INDUSTRY IN RECOGNITION OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY AND THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WOMAN FARMER

FULLERTON, Calif. (March 2, 2026) – Recognizing the growing impact of women in agriculture worldwide, the United Nations has designated 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer. The resolution, led by the United States and supported by 123 countries, is backed by the California Avocado Commission as part of its ongoing commitment to leadership and sustainability in the produce industry. Further support of women's advancement across all fields is highlighted through International Women's Day (March 8), which celebrates the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women.

Within the California avocado industry, women are playing an increasingly influential role across production, handling, sales, marketing and strategic leadership. Their expanded presence reflects a broader shift toward diversified leadership and forward-looking business practices that support reliable supply, sustainability, and continued category growth for retail and foodservice partners alike.

In recognition of both International Year of the Woman Farmer and International Women's Day, CAC is highlighting a few of California's female avocado growers to showcase the role of women in the industry.

Rachael Kimball Laenen

Rachael is the Commission's current board of directors chair and is the first woman to hold this position within the organization. She is the sixth generation of her family to farm in Ventura County and the fourth to nurture locally grown California avocados. Before her farming career, Rachael worked in international motorsport, managing global sponsorships for some of the world's most valuable brands, as well as delivering high-level events and hospitality. She then returned to California to work alongside her father, growing avocados on 150 acres between Santa Paula and Fillmore. Their grove was devastated by the Thomas Fire in 2017 and she shepherded ranch recovery and manages ongoing operations. Very active in the avocado industry, Rachael previously held other positions on the CAC board and its marketing committee, sustainability taskforce and succession taskforce, as well as serving as a member of the Hass Avocado Committee. She is also a graduate of the Hass Avocado Board BOLD program and the California Agricultural Leadership Program.



Maureen Lamb Cottingham

Maureen Lamb Cottingham brings executive leadership experience and deep agricultural roots to her role as an avocado grower and industry advocate. A graduate of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo with a degree in agricultural business, she previously served as executive director of the Sonoma Valley Vintners & Growers Alliance. Today, Maureen manages her family's avocado and lemon groves, first planted fifty years ago. She is deeply invested in steering every aspect of the business, from operations to financial management, ensuring the farm thrives for generations to come. She is proud that their avocados are ethically sourced and that their farm is committed to sustainable practices. Her family's legacy in Ventura County runs deep. Her great-great grandfather is credited with establishing and naming the city of Camarillo in the early 1900s. An engaged



industry leader, Maureen serves as treasurer of CAC's board of directors and has also contributed to its marketing committee and succession taskforce. She is a graduate of the Hass Avocado Board BOLD leadership program and serves as a grower member of the ACP-HLB Taskforce.

Catherine Pinkerton Keeling

Catherine grew up on her family's farm in Santa Paula, where they have been growing California avocados for more than half a century, but that didn't make her a farmer. After college Catherine volunteered for the Peace Corp in Costa Rica, helping women become economically independent as part of a rural development program. She later became a licensed clinical social worker in the Midwest. In late 2017, when the devastating Thomas Fire destroyed her parents' home and about 70% of their avocado ranch,



Catherine felt a calling to help her family rebuild their farm. A passionate advocate for California avocados and sustainable agriculture, Catherine has served as an alternate on the CAC board of directors and serves on the board of directors of the United Water Conservation District.

“Women are a driving force in California agriculture, serving as growers, business owners and stewards of multi-generational farms,” said Ken Melban, CAC president. “In the California avocado industry, female farmers play a vital role in advancing sustainable growing practices, driving operational excellence and preserving family farming legacies. Their contributions are essential to the continued growth and prosperity of our industry.”

As the Commission celebrates the women helping shape the future of California avocados, the industry is also entering the heart of the 2026 harvest season with optimism.

With improving market conditions, California avocado harvesting is now ramping up. While some growers began bringing fruit to market in January and February, the majority of this year's locally grown and sustainably farmed crop is expected to ship from April through August. The Commission currently estimates the 2026 California avocado crop at approximately 330 million pounds. At peak harvest, the Commission anticipates promotable volumes ranging from 10 to 15 million pounds per week, providing retail and foodservice partners with a steady supply of premium California avocados during key spring and summer demand periods.

About the California Avocado Commission

Created in 1978, the California Avocado Commission strives to enhance the premium positioning of California avocados through advertising, promotion and public relations, and engages in related industry activities. Ethically sourced California avocados are sustainably farmed and locally grown for exceptional quality and freshness, by about 3,000 growers in the Golden State. The California Avocado Commission serves as the official information source for the California avocado industry. Visit CaliforniaAvocado.com.

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