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California Polytechnic State University

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Cal Poly, Mission Produce Open State-of-the-Art Avocado Operation on Campus

SAN LUIS OBISPO - Cal Poly's College of Agriculture and Mission Produce are planting a new 50-acre avocado orchard designed to be a profitable commercial operation as well as a showcase and field classroom for the latest orchard management techniques.

Mission Produce, a Southern California avocado and avocado products company with annual sales of more than \$100 million, will plant the orchard and install state-of-the-art irrigation and orchard-care systems on 50 acres of Cal Poly land irrigated with Cal Poly water.

Mission produce will also provide orchard management and harvesting crews. The company will make a donation to Cal Poly's College of Agriculture at the end of each harvest based on proceeds from sale of the avocados.

College of Agriculture Associate Dean Mark Shelton said the new orchard will serve as a lab site and field classroom for Cal Poly students, and the commercial operation there will offer internships for students as well. The college also anticipates offering short courses and seminars for Central Coast avocado growers in the new orchard. "It will be a showcase orchard using the latest and best management practices, irrigation, design and frost-protection equipment, and it will also be a first-class lab for our students," Shelton said.

The College of Agriculture has been working on the partnership for the past year with Mission Produce CEO Steve Barnard, a Cal Poly College of Agriculture alumnus. Cal Poly began field preparation for the orchard today (Aug. 13). It should be ready for planting in May.

Mission Produce will invest some \$350,000 in planting and equipping the orchard, said Barnard, and will fund its \$75,000 annual operation costs.

"It's a good investment for both Cal Poly and Mission Produce," Barnard said. U.S. avocado consumption is growing while the nation's avocado-growing regions are limited, which should ensure a solid market for the Cal Poly avocados, he said. "This should give the partnership a good return on its investment."

Cal Poly already has about 17 scattered acres planted with avocado orchards. But the new Mission Produce orchard will offer students the chance to learn first-hand about large-scale commercial avocado operation and vertically integrated avocado marketing practices, something Cal Poly can't do now.

"We don't have the resources from the state to put in a commercial-scale operation," Shelton said. "That's why private partnerships with industry like this are very important."

Mission Produce also has strong packaging, marketing, distribution, global sourcing and value-added product operations, Mission's Barnard explained. It's that orchard-to-consumer integration the company can share with students, he said.

Cal Poly's location and its agriculture program - the fourth largest in the nation - make it an excellent site for a showcase avocado orchard, Shelton explained. Avocados flourish from Mexico to California's Cuesta Grade just a few miles from campus - but fail farther north in colder climates, Shelton added.

Avocado operations in San Luis Obispo County, however, are among the best in the entire Mexico-California region. "This is avocado country. We beat the state average on yield (per acre) for the last couple of years," Shelton said.

The Mission Produce orchard partnership is modeled after the university's vineyard partnership with E. & J. Gallo, launched in 1999. Gallo is planting some 150 acres of university land with premium wine grapes using the latest vineyard design and management practices. The vineyards function both as a classroom and lab site for Cal Poly students and a commercial vineyard operation; proceeds from the vineyard operation will be shared between Cal Poly and Gallo.

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