

Who's Who On New Olive Oil Commission of California

The election results are in for the new Olive Oil Commission of California's inaugural board of directors. Commission directors will have the potential to influence the future of olive oil in the state as the group to recommend labeling and grading standards to the California Secretary of Food and Agriculture. The standards they propose will likely affect not only California and U.S. growers, but could ultimately impact importers as well.

The Olive Oil Commission of California was established as a result Senate Bill 250, introduced by Lois Wolk (D-Davis). The Commission's goal is to improve the state's competitiveness in the global olive oil industry, and its primary strategy to reach that goal will be to set meaningful and mandatory olive oil standards.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) recently announced the elected board members who were chosen by their industry peers. The new board consists of ten members, including two producers and one handler from each of the three primary olive oil producing districts in California and a public member (not yet selected). Each representative has an alternate member as well. The members and their affiliations are as follows:

Producers

Adam Englehardt, Kbar Farming, (Alternate: Gregg Kelley, California Olive Ranch)

Larry Maben, Maben Family LLC, (Alternate: Rich Mathews, Sadeg Ranch Organic Olives)

John Williams, Cal Ag Properties LLC, (Alternate: John Post)

Dick Neilsen, McEvoy of Marin LLC, (Alternate: Karl Giguere, JK Vineyards)

Jeff Colombini, Lodi Farming, (Alternate: Pat Ricchiuti, P-R Farms, Inc.)

Richard Marchini, Marchini Ag, (Alternate: Josh Barton, Barton Ranch)

Handlers

Jim Lipman, California Olive Ranch, (Alternate: Brendon Flynn, Pacific Sun Gourmet)

Jim Etters, Seka Hills Olive Mill, (Alternate: vacant)

Brady Whitlow, Corto Olive LP, (Alternate: Vincent Ricchiuti, ENZO Olive Oil Company)

Public

(Vacant)

In addition to the election of the Commission board, the CDFA appointed a seven-member advisory group who will represent the interests of smaller producers (less than 5,000 gallons per year).

Commission board members have taken active leadership roles in other state efforts to adopt olive oil standards. Some members were signed supporters of

Senate Bill 250 and others are board members of the California Olive Oil Council and the American Olive Oil Producers Association (AOOPA).

Kimberly Houlding, Executive Director of AOOPA, said her organization does not have an official stance on a particular standard it hopes the Commission will adopt, but she is confident that the standards developed will give consumers confidence that the bottle of extra virgin olive oil they purchase is authentic and high quality. Houlding noted that the science of oils continues to evolve and new standards may be able to identify biochemical markers that work for U.S. olive oils.

Commission board member John Williams wants California olive oil brands to be known as top quality oils. He anticipates that the Commission will consider a variety of existing standards but believes that the international standard is lower than what the Commission will want to recommend. Williams named the Australian Standard for Olive and Olive-Pomace Oils as a good basis for labeling and grading benchmarks. He said that whatever standards are ultimately proposed will ensure the oil is high quality but will still be standards that growers can meet. Williams also believes that a marketing order would be useful means to “force importers to be honest” about what is in their bottles.

Any recommendations on standards made by the Commission to the Secretary of Food and Agriculture would be subject to public hearing. The first meeting of the Commission board will be May 8 in Sacramento, California.

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