

# ESCONDIDO'S AGRICULTURE - AN ECONOMIC ENGINE FOR THE FUTURE



By John Ruetten and Eddie Grangetto

**A**griculture has historically been a substantial part of Escondido's economy and culture. Although many people may not notice it today, it is still a vital part of Escondido. A robust agricultural industry is still chugging along, often behind the scenes and sometimes just around the corner. To really understand the relationship between Escondido and agriculture, we must start at the beginning.

The first people to inhabit the Escondido region were the Kumeyaay Indians beginning in about 1000 AD. Fast-forwarding several hundred years, Southern California was part of Spain until Mexico gained its independence in 1822. In 1843, Governor Micheltorena granted over 12,000 acres of the Escondido valley to Juan Bautista Alvarado who named the rancho El Rincon Del Diablo. The land was primarily used for ranching until the Escondido Land and Town Company finally acquired it and subdivided it into farms.

The City of Escondido, incorporated in 1888, grew steadily through the late 1800s and the early 20th century on a foundation of agriculture, mainly grapes and citrus. By 1888, there was a railroad connection to Oceanside to transport farm products out of the valley and by 1893, 50,000 fruit trees had been planted. Peak lemon production occurred in 1945, but by 1960 Escondido was beginning its transformation into a bedroom community for San Diego and the surrounding areas. Escondido's population expanded rapidly between 1960 and 1990, growing from 16,000 people to over 100,000.

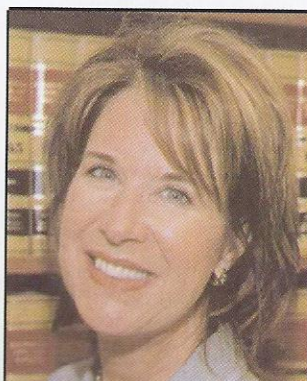
Although the Escondido historical timeline has no mention of agriculture after 1960, it remains a significant part of Escondido's economy. The products have evolved over time. Citrus dominated early on, but in recent years avocados have become more prevalent, yielding \$25 million or more per year. But Escondido's agricultural economy is much more than

just avocados, including well-known nurseries that grow plants that are sold throughout the southwest and a variety of produce sold in local farmer's markets. Eric Larsen of the San Diego County Farm Bureau (offices in Escondido) estimates that the overall "farm-gate" for the area surrounding Escondido is about \$100 million per year. Economic analyses suggest that the multiplier effect on the economy is four times the farm-gate, or about \$400 million. This \$400 million is reflected in sales of automobiles and trucks, farming equipment, fertilizer, tires, insurance, banking, and many other products and services. Furthermore, each farm job typically supports two additional non-farm jobs, and these jobs are often higher paying. The bottom line is that although it may not be very noticeable, agriculture is still plowing forward by producing jobs, enhancing the landscape, and enriching the character of Escondido.

There are challenges. Not unlike other communities, agriculture is endangered by development and the rising price of water. Given these threats, area growers have formed the Escondido Growers for Agricultural Preservation (EGAP). EGAP is working with the City of Escondido and community leaders to ensure that agriculture remains a vibrant part of Escondido's future. The timing is right for fully understanding the benefits of

agriculture. This is because it is an essential part of Escondido's strategy for developing recycled water, which is critical for avoiding prohibitive wastewater disposal costs and increasing water reliability. The city is also looking for opportunities to expand business activity and enhance its brand. One of these business sectors is the wine industry, which would greatly benefit from broader farm activities and efforts to preserve land for agricultural uses. EGAP has been intimately involved with both recycled-water development and the city's efforts to identify and expand strategic business sectors. In these challenging economic times, cities all over the country are looking for ways to boost their local economies. Needless to say, there is stiff competition for attracting new businesses and exciting brands. Escondido can ill-afford to lose its farm-gate, a mature economic engine that has been working behind the scenes for decades.

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