

## Honoring Cookie Bianco

Remarks shared by Kathleen Nave on March 11, 2024 at the California Fresh Fruit Association 88<sup>th</sup> annual meeting

Good morning all. It is a pleasure to be here with you today and join you in honoring Cookie Bianco, a man who is very special to many in this room – including me – and who is truly a founding member of the modern California table grape industry.

As many of you know, the commission doesn't spend a lot of time recognizing the contributions made by those who serve. Part of the fabric of the organization is to expect that those who agree to serve do so with a seriousness of purpose and that each will do his or her duty to the industry without a lot of fuss. However, every now and then it is important to take the time to recognize individual service – to acknowledge the level of contribution made and to express gratitude for it. And so that is what we will attempt to do today when for only the second time in a shared history that spans more than 60 years, CFFA and the commission join together to honor one of our own for above and beyond service to the industry. The award we will present to Cookie is the first ever joint Lifetime Achievement Award.

The Award represents many things including Anthony Vineyards' leadership with CFFA since 1975 and Cookie's 38 years and counting tenure on the commission board. And, as our program notes, this is an award given to an outstanding individual whose pioneering spirit and demonstrated inventiveness has inspired others – someone who protects grower interests and includes the industry in a positive way.

I have known Cookie since he joined the commission board – for the second time - in 1989. He has served ever since and is a past chairman; someone who helped guide the organization and the industry it represents through some challenging times that included multiple legal battles that threatened the industry’s ability to work together through the commission. To say we have been through a few wars together would be an understatement. No matter the challenges, Cookie’s focus is always on sticking together to tackle the challenges and expand the opportunities as aggressively as possible in all fields of play.

I told Cookie recently that he never ceases to amaze me. I do not think I have ever had a phone conversation with him that didn’t end with him sharing a new idea or pushing one he has raised before that he thinks needs more attention. Truly – this has not changed as time has passed. Cookie’s brain is as fertile as ever and his drive for action – to do something! – is as strong as it has ever been.

It isn’t possible to tell Cookie’s life story or the story of his life in the table grape industry in a few minutes nor would it be appropriate to try as there is more we don’t know than we do know. Before watching a video that will allow Cookie to speak for himself, I wanted to share a few key points about the person we honor today.

Cookie served on the very first commission board seated in 1968. If my math is right, he would have been 34. I call that pretty young – he said he was a “young pup.” He served for two years before having to step off because as he says, “we went broke.” We all know the story and how unfair it all was and we know that through hard work and no small measure of sheer determination Cookie, in partnership with Bobby and

Edith began again – working for other people while they saved money to buy a small vineyard they named Anthony Vineyards after Cookie’s father. Today Anthony Vineyards is a multi-commodity vertically integrated fruit and vegetable farming company with operations in Mexico and in the San Joaquin and Coachella valleys.

In 2018, in celebration of the commission’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Cookie was honored by CDFA for his years of dedicated service to the State of California. I’d like to read an excerpt of the proclamation signed by the Secretary of Agriculture.

*“In 1968, as the first organization of its kind in the state, the California Table Grape Commission was new, innovative, and untested. Those who served were competitors and risk-takers; growers who shared a commitment to the long term, a willingness to work together for the good of the whole, and a belief that they could shape a better future. Like you, many of those serving in that first year became industry leaders who built companies from modest beginnings or from nothing at all and in so doing built a world-class industry that now provides its beautiful, healthy product to consumers in 60 countries.*

*During your years of service on the Commission board, the challenges have been many, varied, and unending. You, like others in the industry, have persevered and have found new ways to move forward.”*

In some ways, that says it all doesn’t it? A competitive risk-taker focused on the long-term who believes in working with neighbors and competitors for the good of the whole out of an ongoing belief that together they can shape a better future. Someone who started with nothing but a belief in himself, the love and support of his family, and the gifts God gave him and built a world-class business and helped build

a world-class industry. Someone who has faced many, varied, unending challenges and has persevered and found new ways to move forward.

As someone responsible for the running of an organization governed by a board, I would simply like to say that Cookie exemplifies what a commitment to serve means. I don't think he has ever missed a board meeting. He always comes prepared to participate; he focuses on the discussion – not his phone - he expresses his views but doesn't belabor them – or at least not very often 😊 – he stays from beginning to end. He follows up afterward to talk about the discussion and next steps.

Cookie, thank you for always being there, for being such an example to all of us in so many ways, and for allowing us to honor you.