New Study Suggests Dairy Digesters Aren’t Cost Effective — Who’s Milking It?

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Amidst the dissonant voices debating the future of California’s dairy industry, one narrative remains steadfast in its determination to rewrite the script. Against a backdrop of skepticism and opposition from environmentalist groups, the story of dairy digesters emerges as a cost-effective solution to meet California’s climate goals — reducing greenhouse gas emissions by roughly 2 million metric tons per year, according to a written statement from the California Air Resources Board.

A study released by the Center for Food Safety claimed that the cost of digesters has not been accurately reported by state regulators. Co-authored by Kevin Fingerman, associate professor of environmental science and management at Cal Poly Humboldt, and environmental scientist Donovan Wakeman, the study utilizes the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund estimates which do not include incentives provided to the dairy industry.

“The Dairy Digester Research and Development Program (DDRDP), administered by the California Department of Food and Agriculture is the second most cost-effective program funded by cap-and-trade proceeds with an expenditure of $9 for every ton of CO2 abated,” the study said. “While this figure accurately reflects the expenditures of the DDRDP program, it misrepresents the true cost of these investments by ignoring other sources of funding that have flowed to dairy digester projects in California.”

The study then estimates that the true cost of dairy digesters is $159 per ton with all public funding and market incentives considered. However, according to an emailed response from David Clegern, public information officer for CARB, the purpose of the GGRF Quantification Methodologies is not intended to determine the cost-effectiveness of any project when considering all funding and necessary costs.

Still, $159 per ton is cost-effective amongst state programs, Michael Boccardo, president of West Coast Advisors and executive director of Dairy Cares, noted. See DAIRY DIGESTERS on PAGE 4

Balancing Fish and Flows

By Scott Hamilton
President, Hamilton Resource Economics

It was the 29th of February 2024. The big storm that would drop 10 feet of snow off the Sierra Nevada in early March was yet to arrive. Still, floodwaters made their way through the Yolo Bypass, circumnavigating Sacramento and saving the city from flooding. Despite the floodwater, the State Water Project allocation was at 15% and the state’s share of San Luis Reservoir was less than half full. On that day, the California Department of Water Resources projected the flow from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to the Pacific Ocean was 111,600 cfs — a flow just shy of one-quarter of a million-acre-feet per day. The State Water Project pumps were operating at 5,000 acre-feet per day — about one-quarter of their capacity.

The water project pumps were limited to help protect endangered fish. The fish of concern that day were steelhead. For some unknown reason, the crop of steelhead in 2024 was enormous. If population estimates were made and recorded it could have been the largest production in 50 years. But no one knows. There is no estimate of the population of out-migrating steelhead. And they were being salvaged at the pumps at numbers previously unseen. But were the projects salvaging 0.1% of the fish or 10%? Were the pumps creating population-level impacts? Again, no one knows. So out of an abundance of caution, pumping was restricted.

If it had not been steelhead limiting pumping, it would have been some other species — most likely delta smelt. Natural delta smelt is now observed very rarely in the Delta. Their numbers are being salvaged at the pumps at numbers previously unseen. But were the projects salvaging 0.1% of the fish or 10%? Were the pumps creating population-level impacts? Again, no one knows. So out of an abundance of caution, pumping was restricted.

Over the last few years, nearly 300,000 have been added to Delta waters. Delta smelt is the species most likely to limit exports from January through June — the time when surplus water exists in the Delta. But why? How should the pumps be operated to protect fish?

A National Academy of Sciences Committee met in California for the second time in a month with that question in mind. The problem is tricky. When the State Water Project was initiated in the mid-1960s, the project wasn’t fully built. As California’s population grew, it was envisioned that additional facilities would be added to the Project to provide the... See FISH AND FLOWS on PAGE 13

2024 Trends and Outlooks in Central Valley Agriculture

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

The agricultural industry in California is one of the largest economic drivers in the state, with over 400 commodities, which account for over a third of the country’s vegetables and three-fourths of the country’s fruits and nuts.

Tulare, Fresno, and Kern counties ranked in the top 5 for U.S. agricultural sales according to the recently released 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture — a report taken once every five years. Despite a continuous decline in the total number of farms in California, the value of agricultural sales in California increased. Since 2023, the Central Valley has received ample rainfall coming off of a prolonged drought, but rising labor costs, high inflation rates, and the push for SGMA compliance still hinder agriculture production. Three of the region’s top commodities — grapes, almonds, and dairy — are seeing the effects of these obstacles, but the industries are optimistic in 2024.

WINE GRAPES

Despite higher-than-average yields per acre for wine grapes, consumer demand continues to decline, creating an excess market cycle for the California wine market according to Turrentine Brokerage.

The California Department of Food and Agriculture’s preliminary Grape Crush Report reflected a total of 3.67 million tons during the 2023 harvest, but this figure failed to account for soft demand and mounting disease concerns which left several acres unharvested, Turrentine Brokerage explained in a press release. See TRENDS AND OUTLOOKS on PAGE 13
President’s Message

By Jenny Holtermann
President, KCFB

Growing up on a family farm, I remember my father dealing with multiple challenges facing the agriculture industry. A dependable workforce, irrigation deficiencies, low market prices, and business dynamics were just a few I remember. Thirty years later, as my husband and I farm today with his family, I see many parallels to the current issues in agriculture.

Writer-philosopher George Santayana once said, “Those who do not learn their history, are doomed to repeat it.” There have been so many great forefathers before us who have tried to tackle issues in agriculture. Are we open to their criticism? Are we open to their experiences? Are we willing to sit down and learn from their mistakes and successes?

During two main events in March, these same questions came to mind. The Water Association of Kern County hosted its annual Kern County Water Summit with topics ranging from federal water updates, water banking, the economic impact of water regulations, and SGMA to name a few. It was the SGMA panel and discussion from State Water Board Vice Chair, Dee Dee D’Adamo that got me thinking, “What have we learned?” As our county prepares for SGMA, there are many new approaches in the works. The structure, coordination, and technical support organizations are very different this time around as our Kern Basin groundwater sustainability plan is on the chopping block yet again. We have a team of water managers, landowners, engineers, and consultants working together in collaboration to hopefully create an approved SGMA plan. Kern County has learned from a few failed attempts that all parties need to be on the same page. The approach to our county plan has several moving factors, but there seems to be much more coordination and cooperation working toward a common goal. Our boots are on that landscape across California and even nationally in some areas. This hands-on experience will allow us to grasp the complexities of the agricultural sector and advocate effectively for farmers and ranchers.

Their failures and disappointments are opportunities we need to understand to ensure we do not follow the same path. When we forget the struggles they faced, we are doomed to repeat them. We have a choice to either learn from our experiences or ignore our history. With all that is facing agriculture in this dire time, we can not disregard the past. Local family farmers and ranchers built Kern County and it is our job to ensure agriculture has a future with them in it.

Executive Director’s Report

By Rachel Nettleton
Exec. Director, KCFB

I am thrilled to announce that I have been chosen to participate in this year’s Leadership Farm Bureau class. Among eight other individuals chosen from across the state of California, I am honored to represent Kern County and contribute to the agricultural community in this unique 10-month leadership development program.

Led by the California Farm Bureau, the program was designed to invest in emerging leaders within the Farm Bureau network. Over the course of ten months, I will undergo comprehensive training and gain insights into various aspects crucial for effective leadership. This program encompasses a wide array of activities and workshops that focus on key areas essential for leadership growth. From governmental affairs and personal development to agriculture issues, each area of the program is designed to equip us with the skills and knowledge necessary to make a meaningful impact in our communities and beyond.

One of the highlights of the program is the immersion into political advocacy, which includes both California and Washington, D.C. lobbying sessions. Engaging with legislators, administrative, and regulatory officials provides us with firsthand experience in policy development and implementation at both state and national levels.

Furthermore, a special emphasis is placed on agriculture issues, where we will receive in-depth training from industry experts and gain exposure to the diverse agricultural landscape across California and even nationally in some areas. This hands-on experience will allow us to grasp the complexities of the agricultural sector and advocate effectively for farmers and ranchers.

This year’s leadership class officially launched in Sacramento this February. There, I had the opportunity to meet my classmates from different counties and delve into the history of the California Farm Bureau and why this program was created. The sessions aimed to enhance our leadership skills and equip us with the tools needed to navigate professional challenges.

I am extremely grateful for this opportunity to grow as a leader and deepen my understanding of the issues facing our agricultural community. I look forward to sharing my experiences!
Young Farmers & Ranchers

By Christine Johnson
Chair, Kern County Young Farmers & Ranchers

Another election season is upon us, and while I hope your preferred candidates made it through the primaries, did you know that there is another important way you can vote? It’s a vote that has the power to impact your everyday life now and in the future. In fact, this vote takes place three times a day, every single day.

I’m talking about what’s on your plate. I believe that you have control over key components of your health and your community’s well-being by voting with your fork.

My encouragement to you is to make conscious choices about the food you consume. My invitation to you is to vote with your fork by making conscious choices about the food you consume. We have the privilege of living in a place where the grocery store down the street stocks truckloads of choices. The brands we support and the companies we do business with compete for our dollar. Why not take some time to examine how your fork will impact these stakeholders?

Here are five suggestions to practically vote with your fork.

1. Prioritize locally recognized brands. It may cost a little more, but remember that every purchase you make contributes to the local economy and the surrounding communities. Local vendors are friendly, and some let you reserve popular items ahead of time if you ask. Other vendors deliver to your home!

2. Many national companies are no longer politically neutral. Consider supporting brands and establishments that hold values similar to your own. I know a certain beverage company that was impacted by this recently.

3. Kern County grows an amazing repertoire of fruits, vegetables, nuts, dairy products, meat, and much more. Carrots, onions, garlic, tomatoes, and pomegranates have made it to the top 20 commodity list for Kern County, all of which have well-studied health benefits. Consider consuming a few extras of these local rock stars on your plate.

4. Get to know your local farmers market or CSA. There are several great options in Bakersfield and the surrounding communities. Local vendors are friendly, and some let you reserve popular items ahead of time if you ask. Other vendors deliver to your home!

5. Get creative and try a new healthy ingredient. Set some small, practical goals to improve what’s on your plate. I often remind myself of a quote by Jordan Peterson: “Don’t compare yourself to someone else. Compare yourself to who you were yesterday.” Make one good choice and celebrate that win.

Many like carefully selecting political candidates, making conscious choices about what’s on your plate has the potential to send a strong message. Your next menu could provide for your family and impact your community in a positive way. Be encouraged that every bite has more power than you realize.

Pistachios and Almonds — $14,559±/AC (NEW LISTING)
77.37± acres | Wasco Area, Semi Tropic WSD non-contract, Well water, Productive Soils. Pistachios and Almonds in Full Production.

TABLE GRAPES — SALE PENDING
119.54± acres | Delano Earlimart Irrigation District, Lower Tule River Irrigation District, Quintanya varieties, Productive Soils.

PISTACHIOS, ALMONDS AND FARMLAND — $21,940±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)
134.02± acres | Shafter City Limits and Sphere of Influence, Shafter Wasco Irrigation District, 2 Wells, Excellent Soils, Almonds & Pistachios in Full Production.

ALMONDS — $24,747±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)
155.73± acres | Wasco Area, 2 SOURCES OF SEMI TROPIC WSD CONTRACT WATER, 1 Well, Solar, Class 1 Soils, Almonds in full production.

Almonds, Cherries and Solar — $17,090±/AC (NEW LISTING)
156.46± acres | Shafter Area, Shafter Wasco El Avenue Area, 1 Well, Solar, Productive Soils, Almonds and Cherries in Full Production.

FARMLAND — $12,000±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)
156.46± acres | Wasco Area, Shafter Wasco El Avenue Area, 1 Well, Solar, Productive Soils, and Perfect for permanent crops.

DRIED LAND — $1,750±/AC
231.42± acres | Taft Area, West Kern WD Residential service, Recreational and Rural home site.

ALMONDS — $15,000±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)

Butte City Almonds and Walnuts — $17,511±/AC (SALE PENDING)
21.4± acres | Glenn County, 2 Wells, Abundant Well Water, Productive Soils. 239± Solar System, Almonds and Walnuts in Full Production.

Walnuts, Table Grapes, Pistachios — $20,812±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)
69.5± acres | Selma Area, North Fork CSA, Excellent Soils, Quality Well Water, Diversified Portfolio, Solar System.

ALMONDS — $12,548±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)
394.47± acres | Wasco Area, Semi Tropic non-contract water, 3 wells, 60.4± kW Solar System, Productive Soils, Almonds in full production.

ALMONDS — $17,661±/AC (NEW LISTING)
94.4± acres | Wasco Area, Matador/Sunset Ranch, Semi-Tropic WSD Contract and non-contract water, Well water, Productive Soils, and Young Almonds in production.

ALMONDS — $17,988±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)
113.5± acres | Wasco Area, Semi-Tropic WSD Contract and non-contract water, 4 Wells, Excellent Soils, and Young Almonds in production.

ALMONDS — $17,261±/AC (PRICE REDUCED)
1,237.33± acres | Wasco Area, Portwood Ranch, Semi-Tropic WSD Contract Water, 2 Wells, Excellent Soils, Young Almonds in production.

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Protect the Pollinators: Beehive Health and Central Valley Theft Crisis

Central Valley almond farmers need bees like a symphony needs musicians — without them, almond production falls silent. Ninety percent of the United States bee population is in California for the almond bloom, Tim Sawyer, the marketing lead of BeeHero said.

Sawyer explained that pollination is the only remaining part of commercial agriculture not impacted by data-driven decision-making. BeeHero was developed out of necessity to ensure precise pollination.

The California company works directly with beekeepers to measure the strength of their hives and offers a platform for growers to access how much pollination they receive. Sensors are placed in the beehives to monitor the colony’s acoustic signature, temperature, and humidity. According to Sawyer, BeeHero provides beekeepers with this monitor technology for free but brokers their bees in California for almond pollination. Hives are fitted with a range of sensors and collect a combination of data — drawn from thousands of monitored hives and additional research — to assess hive health.

The three metrics include colony size, brood health, queen presence, and recorded bee flight hours.

“Because of the sensor, we can measure the bee flight out, so we can actually tell how much pollination that grower is actually getting,” Sawyer said. “Sensors are all over the field, so they can actually see if that part of the field, maybe hive hives aren’t doing good, maybe the queen died…whatever could have happened that would mean pollination was not as optimal as it could be, we can that and bring more bees.”

BEE BURGLARS

However, amidst this crucial work, an alarming issue plagues the industry — beehee theft. In Jan., almost 100 hives were stolen in Fresno County, worth roughly $34,000. The hives were stolen from a field near Interstate 5 and W. Panoche Road, west of Mendota. South Dakota beekeeper Andy Streichlow is offering a $100,000 reward for the return of his stolen hives. Beehive theft is common during almond bloom, as thousands of commercial bees are transported from across the U.S. to pollinate California’s $5 billion almond industry. In 2022, 144 beehives were stolen in Wasco. Last year, thieves stole roughly 2,300 beehives in California — primarily from the Central Valley — setting a state record.

Ryan Jacobsen, CEO of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, told ABC News that hive theft devastates beekeepers who invest hundreds of dollars into one hive. Due to the large number of hives brought to the Central Valley in February and March, thieves will likely remain prevalent, but beekeepers can register hives with the county sheriff’s office or invest in anti-theft technology.

Central Valley Theft Crisis

BEE BURGLARS

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Dairy Digesters

To get to this estimate, the study utilizes a five-year average credit price of $160, but footnotes state on page 11 that the current Low Carbon Fuel Standard credit price is $73 per ton and has been on a decline since 2021.

“That’s [almost] $90 above where it’s at today, so to get to that $2.8 billion number, he used a five-year average… it has slowed because of the LCFS index. I believe we were at $53 a couple of weeks ago,” Boccardo said.

Aside from the equation to fit a five-year average credit price took the state’s estimate of $195 million in total to $589 million for the digester programs. While the Center for Food Safety study clarifies that the estimate is necessarily imprecise, it claims it to be conservative.

“Part of me laughs at that because it still makes it one of the most cost-effective programs in the state,” Boccardo said. “You add all that and you treat it differently than every other project that you’re analyzing, and it still outperforms them.”

While the study explores the incentives for the dairy digester program, it does not apply the same scrutiny to other state programs such as most electric vehicle projects which all have some investment tax credit available to them, referenced in the California Climate Investments 2023 report.

The study concludes with a direct citation of the California Climate Investments report’s 71 listed projects — found in Appendix A — stating that 51 of these projects provide a return-on-investment calculation. Taken as is, the study affirms that the digester program is the second-most cost-effective program, but with its new calculation to include public funding, digesters move to the 22nd most cost-effective.

The study does not clarify if additional calculations were made for the other 30 projects to reach this conclusion.

“[Fingerman’s] critical of the state program for not doing a complete analysis, but then he only does the complete analysis for one type of program and tries to compare it back to the others where he didn’t bother to do the same analysis,” Boccardo said. “So now you’ve got a complete apples-to-oranges type of characterization.”

Further, Steve Lyle, public affairs director for CDEFA explained that the ROI calculations are based on the total 141 LCFS-approved dairy pathways, but only 57 directly belong to the state’s DDRDP program.

PAY THE MILKMAN

Another point of contention in the study is that the costs of the LCFS program come from purchasers of transportation fuels which is a form of subsidy from a public cost. However, according to Lyle, it is not unusual for pollution sources to bear the cost of mitigating their pollution, especially considering the benefits the public receives from LCFS.

“The LCFS has replaced billions of gallons of gasoline and diesel fuel with biofuels and other alternatives,” Lyle said in an email. “For example, the program is directly responsible for the major build-out of Electric Vehicle (EV) charging and hydrogen fuel dispensers for fuel cell vehicles, as well as the significant deployment of biofuels in the medium and heavy-duty sector that reduce criteria pollutant emissions compared to diesel use.”

Several programs are funded by California Climate Initiatives. One of the conflicts is the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities program.

The Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities Program received $3,276 million from the GGRF for pollution sources to bear the cost of mitigating their pollution, thereby exacerbating climate change for the general population,” Lyle said.

Still, environmental justice groups see dairies as environmental hazards that pollute water and “rely on the exploitation of female cows” to meet demand, according to Sentient Media — a publication that reports on the effects of factory farms on climate, animals, health, and politics.

The primary issue for environmentalist groups, Boccardo explained, is that dairy digester programs are effective, but the goal is to get rid of dairies completely. Organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and The Nature Conservancy have supported the developments in dairy digester projects, showing that the industry can be environmentally sustainable.

“The [Environmental Justice] community is you know, they see dairies as perpetuating dairies in California, which they would like to see leave the state. So that’s the underlying reason for their opposition,” Boccardo said. “It’s not because these projects are not improving environmental performance — they are.”

For now, dairy digesters will continue to work toward California’s GHG reduction goals, amidst the discordant voices of opposition.
OPINION: Social Engineering Through the Lens of Sustainability

By Austin Snedden
Ranching Contributor, Valley Ag Voice

The word “sustainability” has been co-opted to mean something different than its literal definition, and neo-sustainability has short-changed the role of economics. Modern sustainability is often illustrated as a three-legged stool, with every leg being equally important to keeping the stool upright. The three legs of the sustainability stool are said to represent the social element, the environmental element, and the economic element. This illustration shows an abundant lack of knowledge of economics or, more likely, an underappreciation of economic science. The problem comes when this philosophy is used to shape policy regarding business.

Economic science and theory are very complex and multi-dimensional, and as many of us in business know, the complexity of economics can be very challenging and even ruthless in real life. I will explain how the analogy of a three-legged stool is faulty and can be damaging in what it means to true sustainability. The fact of the matter is, economics alone is already a multi-legged stool that is a figment of the imagination.

When discussing the “legs” of the stool that are a contrived need of letting third parties and government agencies beat you over the head with the “third-party legs of social and environmental not necessarily necessary but often damaging to the true meaning of sustainability.

Let’s look at a cattle ranch that has the goal of prolonged production (formerly known as sustainability), the goal is to create revenue for years to come. Revenue is dependent on demand (social), and long-term demand is dependent on beef that makes a consumer satisfied (also social) and willing to purchase again. Revenue is also dependent on production, production is dependent on labor (social), and long-term labor is dependent on quality-of-life acknowledgment (social) that results in long-term retention of labor. Production is also dependent on natural resources (environmental), long-term production is dependent on balancing natural resources (environmental). Long-term production is dependent on a stocking rate that balances forage availability, water availability, and animal health — all environmental.

So, when talking about economics in agriculture, I am spending most of my time addressing social and environmental concepts. Apparently, the social engineers that look to shape or infringe on the private sector have designed this concept of the three-legged stool out of ignorance of economics or more likely, on purpose to forward an agenda. They are trying to infer that economics is synonymous with revenue when that is a grossly over-simplistic and incomplete view of economics. Following economic inputs alone is in itself a self-balancing stool. If you are striving for true sustainable economics, you are already weighing these social and environmental factors. Make sure that you don’t fall victim to a contrived need of letting third parties and government agencies beat you over the head with the “legs” of the stool that are a figment of their imagination.
**Pistachio Sector Seeks Markets to Absorb Bigger Future Crops**

By Bob Johnson, Reporter, Monterey County

Reprinted with permission from the California Farm Bureau Federation

California pistachio growers are searching the globe for potential emerging markets to handle anticipated record-shattering crops in the coming years.

A market outlook for the surging pistachio sector was offered at the American Pistachio Growers annual conference last week in Monterey.

Pistachio shipments to Europe, Asia, Canada and Mexico allowed the sector to avoid overproduction with a 2023 crop that approached 1.5 billion pounds.

Since pistachios are alternate-bearing—producing a light crop one year and a heavy crop the next—2023 is considered an “off” year for the crop and will be down slightly from the 2022 figure.

However, in five years, leaders in the pistachio business said they expect annual crop production to increase to several billion pounds due to the number of nonbearing acres expected to come into production.

Bob Klein, manager of the California Pistachio Research Board, said pistachio acres in California nearly doubled between 1990 and 2000. Since then, he said, “we doubled again each of the next two decades.”

Klein estimated the state has more than 600,000 total acres of pistachios.

“We can’t keep doubling acreage forever,” Klein said. “We have 140,000 acres of nonbearing pistachios that will come on in the next five years.”

While the acreage has expanded, growers have also planted pistachio varieties that are more productive.

Before 2011, the standard variety was Kerman, which produces 3,100 pounds per acre in heavy-bearing years but only 2,200 pounds per acre in light-bearing years. Since 2011, growers have planted the Golden Hills variety, which yields 3,500 pounds per acre in heavy years and only drops to 3,300 pounds an acre in the light years.

“We will have almost 2 billion pounds in 2027,” Klein said. “Over the next five years, we will have 8 billion pounds and we have to move it globally.”

Wesley Wilson, director for member services and communications for American Pistachio Growers, said 72% of state pistachio shipments are exports. Of those, 22% are shipped to Europe, 20% to China, Hong Kong and Vietnam and 13% to customers in the Middle East and Africa.

Domestic shipments declined 1.5% last year, so growers banked on the 10% increase in exports to absorb the record-setting 2023 crop. Shipments to China increased 156% and to Europe by 102% in 2023. China remains a major market for pistachios, but the growth rate of this market is anticipated to slow.

“China is moving from a shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy, to a slower shift to a more modern economy,” said Marc Roliss, an economic forecaster and former co-host of “Squawk Box,” a CNBC cable news program.

“China’s population has peaked and has begun to slow down like Japan in the 1980s. India is the next China.”

The industry began marketing pistachios in India several years ago, and shipments to the country are significant.

“In 2020, we introduced India and shipped over 40 million pounds of pistachios to India last year,” Wilson said. “Their middle-class is larger than the entire population of the United States.”

Technology could make the transition to an industrial economy faster and smoother in India, Rossel said.

“There are 790 million cellphone users and a general acceptance of computer technology in India,” Rossel said. “Artificial intelligence will make accounting, computing and consulting services cheaper. It can also make education more efficient.”

Technological advances such as AI make India a prime marketing target as American Pistachio Growers directs nutrition research money to publicize the health benefits of pistachios with consumers in major current and potential markets.

“We have a lot of experts in the areas we are marketing to,” said Scott Fryer, vice president of global marketing for American Pistachio Growers. “We orient our nutrition research toward consumer trends.”

As the pistachio industry focuses its research on nutrition, it also tries to communicate in ways that resonate with younger-generation customers.

“Older people read newspapers and watch cable television,” said Jimmy Szczepanek, managing director of Ketchum’s Food, Beverage and Cultivate Industry group. “TiTok is the No. 1 source of information about food for Generation Z.”

Pistachio leaders sounded confident that they can meet the challenge to expand global markets for larger crops in the future.

“With about 100,000 nonbearing acres, we can and should expect a 2 billion-pound crop within the next seven years,” said Ali Amin, marketing communications committee chairman for the California Pistachio Export Council.

Amin, founder of Primex International, a trading company dedicated to processing, promoting and exporting pistachios, said council members “will continue to be vigilant and monitor the export markets, while supporting American Pistachio Growers and the industry in increasing demand in existing markets, as well as opening new markets.”

California’s pistachio sector, which had 53,700 bearing acres in 1990, compared to 453,750 in 2023, ranks among the state’s top 10 agricultural commodities, valued at $3 billion.

“Pistachios contribute more to the economy than the total gross domestic product of 51 countries,” Fryer said.

**Federal Climate Regulation Softens Risk Disclosure Rules**

By Christine Souza

Assistant Editor

Ag Alert

Reprinted with permission from the California Farm Bureau Federation

California is the first state in the U.S. to pass laws that eventually require large corporations to publicly disclose greenhouse gas emissions and their climate risks.

The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission followed suit last week. But it approved a weakened federal regulation that drops a proposed requirement for companies to report emissions from their supplier chains and customer use of their products.

Since the federal rule was first proposed two years ago, the American Farm Bureau Federation, California Farm Bureau, businesses groups, companies and others opposed the Scope 3 emissions reporting requirements. Scope 3 are indirect emissions that occur in the value chain, including upstream and downstream emissions.

Opponents argued that compliance cost and difficulty providing the data would be a burden, especially for farmers, who provide most raw products that go into the food supply chain.

AFBF said in a statement the onerous reporting requirements could disqualify small, family-owned farms from doing business with public companies, putting those farms at risk of going out of business.

The organization said, “Regulations intended for Wall Street should not extend to America’s family farms.”

“Farmers are committed to protecting the natural resources they’ve been entrusted with, but they continue to advance climate-smart agriculture, but they cannot afford to hire compliance officers just to handle SEC reporting requirements,” AFBF President Zippy Duvall said. “This is especially true for small farms that would have likely been squeezed out of the supply chain.”

In addition to relaxing reporting of Scope 3 emissions, the federal rule reduces reporting requirements for Scope 1, or direct emissions, and Scope 2, indirect emissions from the production of energy a company acquires for use in its operations. Companies are given discretion to report such emissions that they believe are significant.

SEC Chair Gary Gensler said in a statement the federal rule is specific on what companies must disclose and requires climate-risk disclosures to be included in a company’s SEC filings, such as annual reports.

“These final rules build on past requirements by mandating material climate risk disclosures by public companies and in public offerings,” Gensler said. “The rules will provide investors with consistent, comparable and decision-useful information, and issuers with clear reporting requirements.”

With the approval of the federal rule, attention turns to California.

Last fall, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 253, the Climate Corporate Data Accountability Act, which applies to businesses with total annual revenues exceeding $1 billion. The law requires the California Air Resources Board to develop and adopt the nation’s first requirements for large corporations to publicly disclose their greenhouse gas emissions, carbon in supply chains and climate risks by Jan. 1, 2025.

In his Oct. 7, 2023, signing statement, Newsom called the deadline for implementation “infeasible,” and stated the reporting protocol could result in inconsistent reporting.

“I am concerned about the overall financial impact of this bill on businesses, so I am instructing CARB to closely monitor the cost impact as it implements this new bill and to make recommendations to streamline the program,” Newsom stated.

Newsom also signed Senate Bill 261, the Climate-Related Financial Risk Act, which requires companies doing business in California with more than $500 million in annual revenue to submit reports that divulge how climate change threatens their business starting in 2026.

The governor’s initial 2024-25 budget proposal pauses spending for implementation of the two climate laws.

“Farmers and ranchers are committed to addressing the challenges of climate change,” said Christopher Reardon, director of governmental affairs for the California Farm Bureau. “But these regulations only increase the burdens to those who grow food and fiber in this state.”

California Farm Bureau expressed early opposition to SB 253 and SB 261, and shared its concerns with authors of the bills, Reardon said. In comments related to SB 253, the organization said the Scope 3 emissions reporting requirements would increase costs and potentially hurt small- and medium-sized farm employers. In submitted comments, the Farm Bureau stated SB 261 was premature pending release of the federal rule.

“Farmers are committed to protecting the natural resources they’ve been entrusted with, but they continue to advance climate-smart agriculture, but they cannot afford to hire compliance officers just to handle SEC reporting requirements,” AFBF President Zippy Duvall said. “This is especially true for small farms that would have likely been squeezed out of the supply chain.”

In addition to relaxing reporting of Scope 3 emissions, the federal rule reduces reporting requirements for Scope 1, or direct emissions, and Scope 2, indirect emissions from the production of energy a company acquires for use in its operations. Companies are given discretion to report such emissions that they believe are significant.

SEC Chair Gary Gensler said in a statement the federal rule is specific on what companies must disclose and requires climate-risk disclosures to be included in a company’s SEC filings, such as annual reports.

“With the adoption of the federal decision, which dropped Scope 3 reporting requirements, California should remove these requirements.”

Many California food and agriculture organizations joined a California Chamber of Commerce-led campaign to “Stop SB 253.” The coalition claimed that the disclosure requirements would act as a “hidden tax on small businesses.”

In addition, AFBF, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and others are suing California in U.S. District Court for the Central District of California, Western Division. Plaintiffs in the Jan. 30 lawsuit claim the two bills are unconstitutional and violate the interstate commerce clause and the First Amendment.

After the federal rule was approved last week, AFBF urged California to follow the SEC’s lead by withdrawing its Scope 3 reporting requirements for any company doing business in the state.
UC ANR Launches Resource for Small Acreage Landowners, Backyard Livestock

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

The University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources launched a new website for small acreage landowners in the state filled with helpful tips on livestock and poultry care, pest management, emergency preparedness, and more.

The Small Acreage Landowners’ website caters to backyard livestock producers, youth raising livestock, and other small acreage landowners — resources include tips in caring for poultry, goats, sheep, cows, pigs, llamas, alpacas, horses, and rabbits.

In a press release, project leader Julie Finzel, UC Cooperative Extension livestock and natural resources advisor for Kern, Tulare, and Kings Counties, explained that there has been a sizeable boost in interest for small-scale livestock production within the past four years.

“Folks in our communities are hungry for knowledge about how to care for their land and animals — from urban chickens to backyard goats and sheep,” Finzel said.

The website includes information on the most common livestock species and links to sites with in-depth information on specific topics. Information on protecting livestock from predators and pests as well as weed control and water quality are also featured.

Open Agricultural Grants and Scholarship Opportunities

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

California’s farming and ranching communities have a pivotal window of opportunity to apply for various agricultural grants as deadlines approach in April. Funding opportunities include value-added producer grants, farm-to-school programs, and student scholarships.

CDFA FARM-TO-SCHOOL
The Farm to School Incubator Grant Program is open until April 4. Grants are competitive and targeted at increasing local food procurement for school meal programs and expanding educational agriculture and gardening activities.

CDFA will award up to $52.8 million through four separate funding tracks. Track 4, the Farm to School Producer Grant, will fund food producers to increase production, processing, or distribution capacity to sell California-grown foods to the school food market.

USDA VALUE-ADDED
The Value-Added Producer Grant program application deadline is April 16. Agricultural producers interested in value-added activities can apply for funding meant for planning activities or capital expenses related to producing and marketing a value-added agricultural product.

Priority applicants include beginning farmers or ranchers, small or medium-sized farms, ranch-structured as a family farm, farmer or rancher cooperative, and those proposing a mid-tier value chain.

These grants — totaling approximately $31 million — are part of the Local Agriculture Market Program under the 2018 Farm Bill. The maximum grant amount for planning grants is $75,000 and working capital grants are $250,000.

WESTLANDS SCHOLARSHIP
Westlands Water District is offering scholarships to seniors from local west side high schools who are planning to attend a post-secondary education program — such as a two or four-year college or university.

Applicants will choose from three topics for a 350-550 word essay. The topics are as follows:

• Explain how agriculture has affected your life.
• Explain how Westlands Water District has affected you and your family.
• Explain the importance of agricultural water to California and the west side of the San Joaquin Valley.

Winners are selected based on the submitted application, essay, and academic transcript as well as references. Each recipient will be awarded $1,000. The scholarship application deadline is April 21.
Labor and Agriculture Sectors Drive Legislative Initiatives

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Before the Feb. 16 deadline, 2,124 new bills were introduced — 1,505 in the Assembly and 619 in the Senate. With campaigns ramping up during this election year, incumbents are more inclined to introduce legislation that aligns with their constituents’ priorities.

Of the newly introduced legislation, some agricultural bills have a defined link between the bill authors and their primary campaign contributors.

Democratic Assemblymember (AD-31) Joaquin Arambula introduced AB 2240 to open migratory farmworker housing year-round. Farmworker housing structures under the California Department of Housing and Community Development would be open permanently, and the requirement that farmworkers live outside a 50-mile radius of the centers for at least three months to be eligible would be eliminated.

According to the Sacramento Bee, HCD officials expressed concern that opening the centers to all farmworkers would increase competition between migrants and those permanently living in California.

Arambula is up for re-election this year and currently has one opponent — Republican college student Solomon Verduzco.

Roughly 20% of Arambula’s campaign funding comes from the labor sector, with $944,250 since he was elected. In February, the Fresno assemblymember was endorsed by United Farm Workers of America and the California Labor Federation.

Another labor bill introduced by Democratic Senator (SD-18) Steve Padilla — SB 1105 — addresses paid sick leave for agricultural workers. If passed, the bill would allow farmworkers to utilize sick leave to avoid weather conditions such as smoke, heat, or flooding created by a local or state emergency.

According to a press release, Padilla attributes hazardous weather conditions to climate change and explains that using sick days during these conditions will avoid negative health outcomes later on.

“California farmworkers are the very lifeblood of our society, working in conditions few dare face to put food on the table for not only their families, but families across the world,” Padilla said in the release. “Climate change now threatens their health more than ever before. We must do everything we can to adapt our policies to ensure their wellbeing is protected.”

Twenty-two percent of Padilla’s campaign funding came from the labor sector with $215,050 compared to just over $14,000 from the broad agricultural sector. Padilla’s term expires in 2026.

Conversely, Republican Assemblymember (AD-03) James Gallagher has taken at least $311,000 from the agriculture sector since he was elected, representing 10% of his total campaign contributions. Gallagher is up for re-election this year against Democratic opponent Aaron Draper.

Kern County Water Summit Dives Deep into Water Management

Summit panelists examine the complex relationship between water rights, SGMA compliance, and economic sectors in Kern County.

The 2024 Kern County Water Summit took place at the Mechanics Bank Convention Center on March 7 from 6:30 a.m. - 2 p.m. (Photo: Valley Ag Voice)

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Anticipation and concern converged at the 2024 Kern County Water Summit, where stakeholders gathered to address infrastructure, legislation and regulation, and compliance with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

The conference on March 7 was hosted by the Water Association of Kern County and included an in-depth discussion on water management on both an agricultural and urban scale.

While water in Kern County was abundant in 2023 — creating new opportunities for water storage projects and other innovative solutions — a probational hearing with the State Water Board looms as an ever-present reminder of SGMA.

According to Ernest Conant, former regional director of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the Central Valley Project delivers roughly 5 million acre-feet in a year — last year was closer to 7 million acre-feet — to 250 contractors in 29 counties.

He explained that 3.4 million acre-feet is allocated to senior water rights holders, exchange contractors, and wildlife refuges before any water is supplied to farms and cities.

This year, allocations for farmers amounted to 15%, but Conant expects an increase for both the CVP and State Water Project in the upcoming weeks.

“How to achieve a more reliable water supply, that’s our overall objective here, and I see two components to it,” Conant said. “One, we have to fix what we have, and then second, we have to build new storage.”

Current projects include improvements to the B.F. Sisk Dam Safety Project, Friant-Kern Canal, Delta-Mendota Canal, San Luis Canal.

“Obviously if the Friant-Kern Canal was fully operational last year, a lot more water could have been moved down to this area,” Conant said.

Along with infrastructure improvements, the Water Summit zeroed in on new legislation and regulations and their broader implications on the economy. The panel comprised Chelsea Haines from the Association of California Water Agencies, Kern County Chief Economic Development Officer Jim Damien, and Edward Ring from the California Policy Center.

Damien explained that Kern County sees an intersection of water and business as every sector of Kern’s economy — agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, technology, traditional oil and gas operations, and carbon capture sequestration — relies on a sustainable supply of water. This is hindered by a complex web of regulations, he noted.

“In Kern County, water rights are not just a legal construct, this is the currency of survival for many of our businesses,” Damien said. “The intricate system of water allocation established decades ago now faces unprecedented challenges from population growth, environmental concerns, and it could be argued from bureaucratic overreach.”

SGMA compliance was discussed in length throughout the summit as an impending probationary hearing on the Kern County Subbasin approaches next year in Jan. 2025. Damien explained that this compliance requires an investment in infrastructure as well as fundamental changes in land-use practices — changes that may financially cripple businesses in the county.

By the time of that hearing, if Kern’s subbasin groundwater sustainability plan is still inadequate, the State Water Board will intervene, enforcing the subbasin to report groundwater usage and face new pumping fees.

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Gallagher introduced AB 3056 to address the “unintended consequences” of an agricultural overtime law. The bill would reverse the acts of AB 1066, which was passed in 2016 and required farmworkers to receive overtime pay after 40 hours a week.

According to a press release, this approach “failed to recognize the distinct nature of agriculture work, characterized by its seasonal aspects, reliance on natural factors, and handling or perishable goods.” AB 3056 would adjust agricultural overtime requirements to a 50-hour work week.
American Cattle Producers Grateful for Packers and Stockyards Act Win

Press release provided by R-Calf USA

On March 5, the Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued its final rule providing clarification as to what constitutes violations under the Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921 (P&S Act) regarding practices considered retaliatory, deceptive, and unjustly discriminatory.

The P&S Act promotes fairness and competition for the benefit of livestock producers, growers, and consumers, and protects independent producers from the anticompetitive conduct of the packers.

This rule, titled the “Inclusive Competition and Market Integrity Under the Packers and Stockyards Act,” will be effective May 6, 2024. The rule addresses the following:

- It clarifies that the P&S Act prohibits packers from engaging in practices that prejudice, disadvantage, or inhibit market access for producers based on their race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, marital status, age, or on the basis of a producer being a cooperative entity.
- It prohibits packers from retaliating against all livestock producers when, for example, they communicate with a government entity or official to ask them to address problems they may have regarding their industry; or when they assert their right to join or refuse to join a grower association; or when they communicate or cooperate with a person for purposes of improving the production or marketing of their products.
- It prohibits retaliation in the form of a packer interfering in a farm real estate transaction or a contract with third parties.
- It requires packers to keep records relevant to their compliance with the rule for five years.
- It prohibits packers from engaging in deceptive practices such as making, modifying, performing or enforcing a contract by employing false or misleading information or omitting material information. Nor may a packer terminate a contract with a livestock producer by employing a false or misleading statement or omission of material information.

The rule is the second P&S Act rule finalized by the Biden administration. It trails the “Transparency in Poultry Grower Contracting and Tournaments” final rule, that went into effect February 12, 2024. An additional rule has been proposed and is under review at the White House Office of Management and Budget.

“R-CALF USA has worked closely with the past three Administrations to encourage them to write the rules and regulations needed to properly implement and enforce the over 100-year-old Packers and Stockyards Act,” said R-CALF USA CEO Bill Bullard. “We fully expect that this new rule will begin to reshape, reform, and rebalance the disparate bargaining positions between widely disaggregated livestock producers and the highly concentrated meatpackers.”

This rule follows a successful effort by cattle producers from across the nation in which they urged Congress to reject a harmful policy rider from being included in the fiscal year 2024 agriculture appropriations bill. The rider, pushed by the meatpacking lobby and their allies, would have thrown out existing rules, prevented future rulemakings and blocked USDA from making progress on the P&S Act.
General Election Looms: Top Two Primary Winners Gear Up for November Battle

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

As the dust settles on Super Tuesday in California, the Central Valley emerges as a critical battleground for primary candidates, with agricultural issues such as water management and entitlement serving as key points of contention.

Current 32nd District Assemblyman Vince Fong leads the 20th Congressional District race to replace former Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy. According to early results from the Secretary of State, Fong received 41.2% of the vote, with Tulare County Sheriff Mike Boudreaux following at 24.8% and teacher Marissa Wood at 21%.

The 22nd Congressional District’s early results favored incumbent David Valadao who led with 35% of the vote. His opponent, former Assemblymember Rudy Salas received 30.6% of the vote and businessman Chris Mathys followed with 22.6%. Senator Melissa Hartudo trailed behind at 14.1%.

35th District Assemblymember Dr. Jasmine Bains took the lead over Republican opponent Robert Rosas, securing 56.3% of the vote, compared to Rosas who received 43.7%.

Four candidates ran for the 33rd District Assembly seat to replace incumbent Devon Mathis who will retire at the end of his current term. Republicans Alexandra Macedo and Xaviar Avila are leading the race — Macedo at 44% and Avila at 25.6%. Kern County 4th District Supervisor incumbent David Couch secured a lead over his opponents with 53.8% of the vote according to Kern County Elections. Delano councilmember Veronica Cruz Vasquez received 17.2%, Wesco Mayor Alex Garcia received 15.2%, and Delano Vice Mayor Salvador Solorio Ruiz received 13.77% of the vote.

Election results will be updated throughout the canvass period — 30 days granted to California county elections officials to count every valid ballot. Final results for presidential delegates are required to the Secretary of State by April 2, and all other contests by April 5.

Election results are not final until the Secretary of State compiles the official statewide results following the canvass period.

20TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Early results from the 20th Congressional Race to replace former Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy placed Assemblymember Vince Fong in the lead. Four of the candidates — Mike Boudreaux (R), Vince Fong (R), Andy Morales (D), and Marissa Wood (D) — were hosted by KGET in February to debate topical issues affecting local communities as well as the entire nation.

When discussing agricultural water entitlement, Fong explained that farmers are paying 100% for water through the State Water Project and the Central Valley Project but only receive 15% of their total allotment.

“I am the only legislator on this stage and I’ve been fighting for water for the past eight years in Sacramento,” Fong said. “We need to move the water when we get it, increase the pumping when we have it, align the scheduling between the State Water Project and the Central Valley Project, and we need to build more infrastructure.”

Boudreaux described the lack of water provided to farmers as a national security issue, pointing to the harmful pushback from environmentalist groups.

“We have environmentalists who are pushing back against what is an issue of national security. We must be able to feed our soldiers. We must be able to feed America,” Boudreaux said. “If we don’t support our farmers then, quite frankly, we’re in a position where our national security is in jeopardy.”

Both Fong and Boudreaux pointed to innovative technologies to improve water allocation for Central Valley farmers. Fong emphasized the importance of water storage projects while Boudreaux zoned in on hydroelectric dams and desalination plants.

On the other side of the aisle, Wood explained that she is married to a farmer and understands the plight of local growers. She expressed a need to work with environmentalists to ensure that water is not sent away from farmers.

“Water is a shared resource, and we have to prioritize water to the agricultural community as well as water to our rural communities…we have to be innovative; we have to be creative in terms of getting the water here to where it needs to be,” Wood said.

Morales explained his plans to rebuild infrastructure that is “green” and protects the environment via the Green New Deal.

“If we all remember correctly, we used to have a trade war with China and at the tail end of it we had to bail out our farmers to the tune of billions and billions of tax dollars rather than putting our farmers in unnecessary harm’s way,” Morales said. “How about we just give them the resources they need to put food on my plate, your plate, and America’s plate.”

Morales received 3.3% of the vote on Super Tuesday.

22ND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Incumbent for the 22nd Congressional District David Valadao took the lead in the race, but Democratic candidate Rudy Salas was not far behind. The two candidates will advance to the general election in November.

In a prior statement shared with the Valley Ag Voice, Valadao explained his introduction of the WATER for California Act which advocates for reliable water access for farms and rural communities.

“As Congress’ only dairy farmer, I have firsthand experience with the kinds of issues our agriculture community faces. My team and I have regular meetings with stakeholders in our agriculture industry and an open line of communication with many of the farmers, ranchers, and producers in our district,” Valadao told the Valley Ag Voice.

Last year, I brought both the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committees to the Valley to give our farmers a seat at the table and make sure their voices were heard not just by me, but by members from across the country.”

GENERAL ELECTION

Only the top two vote-getters in the primary election move on to the general election. The general election will take place on November 3, 2024.

Reclamation Announces Central Valley Project Water Supply Allocations

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced initial 2024 water supply allocations for Central Valley Project contractors. Wet conditions throughout 2023 prompted a higher allotment for water users based on an estimate of available water, reflecting current reservoir storage, precipitation, and snowpack in the Sierra Nevada.

“The wet hydrologic conditions we experienced during the 2023 water year left most of our reservoirs in good shape as we progressed to the 2024 water year,” California-Great Basin Regional Director Karl Stock said in a press release. “Precipitation totals this water year started off slowly, evidenced by the fact we were well below average at the time of the Feb. 1 water supply forecast. Since that time, several storms have boosted the Sierra Nevada snowpack, bringing us to near normal conditions for Northern California.”

Stock noted that despite the water supply benefits, they are prepared for the possible re-emergence of drier conditions.

Reclamation is working to develop a south-of-Delta drought plan, reserving roughly 83,000 acre-feet of water in San Luis Reservoir for a drought reserve and in San Luis Reservoir for a drought reserve.

The Friant Water Authority, expressed gratitude to Reclamation for the early initial allocation announcement of 60% for Class 1 Contractors,” Stockton East Water District will receive 100% allocation.

FRIANT DIVISION

The Friant Division has two water contract types — Class 1 and Class 2 — and supply is delivered from Millerton Reservoir via the Madera and Friant-Kern canals. Class 1 contractors are typically cities or districts without access to groundwater, whereas Class 2 water is the remaining 1.4 million acre-feet of water from Millerton Lake under long-term contracts. Class 2 contractors use much of this for irrigation and groundwater recharge.

Class 1 contractors in the Friant Division will receive an early allocation of 60% from the first 800,000 acre-feet of available water supply. In a press release, Jason Phillips, CEO of the Friant Water Authority, expressed gratitude to Reclamation for the initial allocation announcement.

“On behalf of FWA and the entire Friant Division of the CVP, I’d like to thank the US Bureau of Reclamation for the early initial allocation announcement of 60% for Class 1 Contractors,” Phillips said. “Under the latest inflow forecasts, we anticipate the need for an increased allocation even under dry conditions to avoid splitting of Millerton supplies this spring. We look forward to frequent updates to the allocation and continued coordination from Reclamation as this water year progresses.”

WILDLIFE

Wildlife refuges north and south of the Delta will receive 100% of their contracts.
Farms Cut Tomato Acres, Await Price as Planting Starts

By Caleb Hampton, Assistant Editor, Ag Alert

Reprinted with permission by the California Farm Bureau Federation
California farmers are scaling down their processing tomato acreage this year as processors enter the planting season with boosted inventory.

The state’s tomato processors planned to contract for 11.6 million tons this year, down about 10% from the 12.9 million tons they contracted for in 2023, according to a January report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“Every grower for the most part has been reduced,” said Mike Montna, president and CEO of the California Tomato Growers Association. Planted acreage was projected to fall from 255,000 last year to 232,000 this year, according to USDA, with growers aiming to produce 50 tons per acre.

In 2023, California growers harvested their largest tomato crop in several years after winter storms replenished water supplies. Processors looking to bolster inventory that was depleted during drought years paid a record-high price.

After that crop, Morning Star, the state’s largest tomato processor, said in a December statement that “inventory levels have been buffered, and a respectable carryover stock is anticipated for that ‘inventory levels have been buffered, and a respectable carryover stock is anticipated for’

“We have to find the right balance between lower demand and still reflecting the risk of growing tomatoes,” Montna said.

Compared to some field crops, tomatoes are expensive to grow and come with greater risks, including heat stress, rain events, and pest and disease pressures. And as with other crops, input costs have surged. From 2017 to 2023, the cost of planting, growing, and harvesting processing tomatoes increased 76%, rising to around $6,000 per acre, according to a study by the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources.

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

DWR Releases Groundwater Mapping Program

Agricultural water use is deemed ‘very efficient.’

In a bid to further monitor and control groundwater resources, California’s Department of Water Resources completed the first phase of its groundwater mapping program, providing live statistics, interactive dashboards, and the latest groundwater information.

“The project — Statewide Airborne Electromagnetic Survey Project — utilized helicopter-based technology to survey the earth’s subsurface, mapping aquifer structures up to depths of 1,000 feet.

From December 2021 to November 2023, DWR covered nearly 16,000 miles across 95 groundwater basins in California. The AEM data collected is publicly accessible on their website. According to a press release, the data will serve as a tool to identify suitable locations to implement groundwater recharge projects that can capture water from winter rain and runoff events.

Paul Gosselin, deputy director of Sustainable Groundwater Management, explained that the state will continue to make investments in technology like AEM to prepare for “the new climate reality.”

“Data from these initial statewide AEM surveys are already being used by local groundwater agencies, and we are excited to move into the next phase, expanding data collection efforts and providing new tools for understanding and managing California’s groundwater on a local, regional, and statewide level,” Gosselin said.

PHASE 2

This new monitoring tool comes on the eve of SGMA’s 10th anniversary, building on an arduous history of state investigations of California’s groundwater basins. DWR is moving forward with the next phase of this work through Basin Characterization wherein both new and existing information will be used to identify underground aquifer structures.

DWR is putting together a team of experts to form a Basin Characterization Workgroup that will further advance local groundwater management. The workgroup is expected to coordinate and collaborate with local, state, and federal agencies, as well as the private sector and academia.

The next Semi-Annual Groundwater Conditions Update — containing recent statewide groundwater data and information along with Annual report data from groundwater sustainability agencies — will be released in May. DWR expects the data to provide in-depth information on the managed and natural groundwater recharge during the 2023 water year.

Agricultural water use

In Feb. DWR claimed that California’s agricultural water use is largely efficient, explaining that water that is not used on one farm is used on another. On average, roughly 9.6 million acres are irrigated with 34 million acre-feet of water, the press release said.

Still, DWR said that because agriculture accounts for approximately 40% of the state’s water use and 80% of all developed water, any improvement in agricultural water use efficiency is significant.

However, this 80% figure was disputed in June 2023 by California Bountiful Foundation Head of Research Dr. Amrith Gunasekara. A more accurate figure for agricultural water use is 15%, according to Gunasekara. Reference Valley Ag Voice’s June 2023 edition for the full story.
USDA Secretary to Play Role in Foreign Ag Land Transactions
Agriculture funding details from the 2024 appropriations bill.

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

President Joe Biden signed the spending package on March 9, narrowly avoiding a government shutdown.

According to a press release from the Committee on Appropriations, the House Republican Conference sought to change the trajectory of federal funding and put an end to wasteful spending, specifically citing initiatives that received billions of dollars outside the normal appropriations process.

“The final Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations bills achieve what we set out to do: strategically increase defense spending and make targeted cuts to wasteful non-defense programs,” Committee Chairwoman Kay Granger said in the press release.

The Agriculture, Rural Development, and Food and Drug Administration Appropriations Act is one of the six bills included in the first package, covering investments in agricultural research, rural water infrastructure, and animal and plant health programs among other areas.

Foreign ownership of U.S. agricultural land is also addressed in the bill by improving the tracking system of foreign-owned land and adding the Secretary of Agriculture to the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. As a member of CFIUS, the USDA secretary will be involved in any transactions involving agricultural land, biotechnology, and industry, with $1 million allocated to improve the USDA's collection and reporting of foreign transactions.

**FUNDING DETAILS**

Within the budget for agricultural programs, the Agricultural Research Service secured $1.788 billion, reflecting an increase of over $43 million from last year primarily geared toward addressing emerging pests and diseases.

Animal traceability efforts — electronic identification tags for cattle and bison — will receive $15 million of the $1.162 billion received by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Both the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Agricultural Marketing Service received lower allotments than in 2023 to cut back on less crucial programs.

NIFA funding maintains $1.678 billion for land-grant universities.

Two other funding reductions compared to 2023 include the Risk Management Agency which received $65.637 million and the Natural Resources Conservation Service which received $914.9 million, $26 million down from 2023 due to removed funding for equity initiatives.

The Food Safety and Inspection Service may see a $31.7 million increase, reaching $1.19 billion to ensure meat and poultry inspectors are well-funded. Additionally, the FDA obtained $6.521 billion to support safeguarding efforts in the food and drug supply. Commodity Futures Trading Commission maintained equal funding to 2023 levels, securing $365 million — $46 million below the President’s Budget Request.

Extra funds to enhance the tracking system for foreign land ownership are included in the $1.209 billion allocated to the Farm Service Agency, and the FSA Agricultural Credit Insurance Fund received over $10 billion in total program loan authorizations.

Rural Development programs obtained a total of $3.6 billion, focusing on home ownership and infrastructure lending, including $90 million for ReConnect broadband funding.

Child Nutrition programs saw a significant boost, reaching $33.266 billion, $4.7 billion above 2023 funding. This includes the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and Summer Food Programs.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children secured $7.03 billion — a $1.03 billion increase — while the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program received $122.4 billion, adjusting for the end of COVID-related benefits and a decrease in participation rates.

Support for low-income seniors will come from the Commodity Supplemental Food Program which received $389 million, a $50 million increase. The Foreign Agricultural Service obtained $2.06 billion, with reductions of $63 million in the Food for Peace Program and $3.3 million from the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program.
Fish and Flows
Continued from PAGE 1
yield that the water users had contracted for. At buildout, the yield the state had promised the contractors was 4 million acre-feet. That quantity was the amount that was to be delivered on average through a five-year drought. The yield these days is far from that – close to about 2.5 million acre-feet per year – which is an average over all years, not drought years. The critical piece of the Project not built was the Peripheral Canal, defeated by California voters in 1982. The Peripheral Canal would have provided better quality water to the State and Federal projects, protected the projects from an earthquake or flood failure in the Delta, and with newer technology, protected fish from entrainment. However, there was a fear that the Peripheral Canal would decimate the Delta ecosystem and reduce water quality to in-Delta users. So, the canal was never built.

Most of the water exported comes from the Sacramento River. That water must make its way across the Delta through a system of waterways never intended for the volumes needed. Two primary channels leading to the pumps are the Old River and Middle River. For water management purposes, the flow in these rivers is combined into one metric – Old and Middle rivers flow (“OMR”). The Delta is a tidal system meaning that uni-directional flows in the Delta are rare – most of the time there are massive inflows with the incoming tide and massive outflows with the outgoing tide. For water management purposes, those tidal flows are averaged. When the pumps are working hard and flows on the San Joaquin River are low, the tidally averaged OMR flow is southward, toward the pumps, in the opposite direction of its natural flow. During the risk period for delta smelt, the maximum permitted tidally averaged southward OMR flow is 5,000 cfs with the understanding that this will limit the movement of fish toward the pumps. The state and federal pumps combined can pump three times that quantity. The dilemma is then simply stated – with SGMA requiring maximum recharge of flood water to achieve groundwater sustainability without massive landfalling and with a competing need to protect endangered fish, how should OMR limits be set? That is the question before the National Academies Committee.

It is, of course, the wrong question. Never mind that with so little natural delta smelt in the estuary, any take at project pumps is easily mitigated with the addition of propagated fish (a strategy not lost on the NAS Committee). The correct question is: how can the projects divert water without harming fish? The last time a NAS Committee engaged in Delta issues was 2010. One of their findings was that: “with the correct water engineering, entrainment effects might be eliminated.”

Trends and Outlooks
Continued from PAGE 1
The wine grape industry initially faced unexpected challenges to meet demand due to the pandemic, leading to shortages in 2021 and 2022. However, by last year, the industry dealt with a surplus of wine. This oversupply is expected to persist for about three years due to various economic factors, Brian Clements, vice president of Turffeine Brokerage said in the release.

In the Central Valley, wine grapes remained unpicked primarily due to reduced sales and disease issues. “If all grapes were harvested, this could have potentially been the largest grape crop in California’s long history,” Mike Needham, California interior Grape Broker said in the release.

Despite this, the quality of the 2023 vintage is praised by winemakers for its richness and structure. However, the industry now faces the challenge of attracting new customers to enjoy these wines.

DAIRY
According to the USDA’s 2024 Dairy Outlook, the industry will face a smaller dairy herd but will see overall industry growth and broadly strengthening prices for both dairy products and fluid milk production.

DAIRY cow inventories from Jan. 1 were 41,000 head lower than the previous year, coupled with about 14,000 fewer dairy replacement heifers, according to the USDA. However, cow numbers in milk production are expected to stabilize in 2024, ending the year at roughly the same level as the beginning of the year.

While the expected number of cows combined with milk per cow is expected to continue its growth, it will be at a slower rate than historical averages. One additional milk day will also result in milk production growing at an annual rate of 7%.


dairy milk prices will reflect the modest increases in production, with all milk prices projected to be $20.95 per cwt — up from $20.48 in 2023. Class 4 milk prices are projected at $20.20 per cwt, up from 2023 prices at $19.12.

Class 4 milk prices are projected to outpace Class 3 prices due to the relative strength of butter and dry milk over cheese and whey.

TECHNOLOGY
Bosch, an independently owned software technology company, released its 2024 State of the Farm Report, which includes information gathered from U.S. farmers on technology, grain marketing, sustainability, and more.

Most of the respondents represent larger farms, with 58% of respondents farming 500 acres or more. One of the key findings showed concern over the price of equipment, profitability, and high inflation rates.

In terms of technology, farmers under 40 viewed software’s value beyond convenience and were even split between helping them manage costs and increasing revenue. Of the respondents, 70% utilize farm record-keeping tools compared to 11% who prefer pen and paper records.

Further, 40% said they are willing to share data with accountants and crop insurance providers — more than a third would share with their agronomist and banker or lenders.

2022 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE
The USDA’s 2022 Census of Agriculture highlights a few key trends for the state’s farming landscape. Despite a decrease in the number of farms to 63,134 representing a 10% decline from 2017 — the average farm size has increased by 10%, averaging 383 acres.

Market value for agricultural products saw a surge to $59.0 billion, an increase of $13.8 billion compared to 2017. Similarly, total farm production expenses have also increased, totaling $49.3 billion — an $11.5 billion increase from 2017 figures.

California continues to embrace renewable energy systems within agriculture, with 16,699 farms utilizing these technologies. Solar energy is the primary renewable energy source adopted by farms and ranches throughout the Golden State.

The average age of California farmers has increased to 59.9 years, up from 59.2 in 2017, suggesting potential implications for the future of agricultural leadership and succession in the state.
California Citrus Farmers Wrestle with Invasive Pests Amidst Market Optimism

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

As the top citrus-producing state, California accounted for approximately 92% of fresh market production in the United States in 2022-2023. The California Citrus Mutual Citrus Showcase discussed the current economy of the industry and addressed key issues such as SGMA compliance and the continuous battle against invasive pests.

Central Valley Subbasins Face Potential State Intervention

Tule Subbasin becomes second groundwater basin recommended for state takeover.

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Groundwater resources continue to dwindle as compliance with SGMA draws a line in the sand for Central Valley subbasins — specifically, six of which may lose control to the state.

Ahead of their probationary hearings, draft staff reports to the State Water Resources Control Board recommended that both the Tulare Subbasin and Tule Lake Subbasin be put on probation and relinquish control to SWB. If groundwater sustainability plans remain inadequate by state standards, the state will take over control of a given basin and enact a supplemental GSP until a new, sustainable plan is in place.

**TULARE LAKE**

The Tulare Lake Subbasin will be the first to undergo a probationary hearing on April 19, facing the risk of losing local control over groundwater. Groundwater Sustainability Agencies within the subbasin include South Fork Kings, Mid-Kings, El Rico, Tri-County, and Southwest Kings.

In October, staff submitted a draft recommendation to place Tulare Subbasin on probation, citing SGMA which states that if a local GSA is not managing its resources sustainably, the state must intervene.

The hearing will be hosted at 1001 1 Street, Sacramento — CalEPA Headquarters — at 9 a.m. To attend virtually, follow this link: https://video.caepa.ca.gov/#/

**TULE SUBBASIN**

Similar to the Tulare Lake Subbasin, staff submitted a draft report calling for the state to place Tule Subbasin on probation.

Now, the basin is the second that has been recommended for state takeover. Of the five key deficiencies described, the report explains that the GSPs allow more subsidence along the Friant-Kern Canal than the maximum amount allowed in the agreement between GSAs and the Friant Water Authority.

A hearing on the draft report will take place on Sept. 17 at 9 a.m. in CalEPA Headquarters. Public comments are open until May 7.

**KAWEAH**

The last probationary hearing for 2024 is the Kaweah Subbasin in November.

**2025 HEARINGS**

The remaining probationary hearings for Kern, Delta-Mendota, and Chowchilla Subbasins will take place in 2025. Kern will start off the hearings in Jan. 2025. Following Kern, Delta-Mendota’s hearing will take place in the first quarter of the year and Chowchilla will be in the second quarter.
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Delta View Water Association Expands Reach to Kings County

New committee to address grower needs in Mid-Kings River and South Fork Kings GSAs.

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

The Delta View Water Association — a non-profit organization representing landowners and growers in the Kaweah and Tulare Lake subbasins — formed a new committee to serve growers in the Mid-Kings River and South Fork Kings GSAs.

Delta View was established in 2019 to support groundwater-dependent growers in the Greater Kaweah GSA as a response to the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. Most of the represented landowners live in Tulare County, but DVWA saw an expressed need for further representation in Kings County.

According to its website, the organization works with local GSAs to advocate for equitable water solutions and to preserve family farms and the health of the local economy. The expanded representation to all landowners and growers in Mid-Kings River and South Fork Kings GSAs within the Tulare Lake Subbasin will create a separate committee membership from that of the Greater Kaweah GSA. In a press release, Rachel Glauser, executive director for the association, explained that the success of DVWA is a direct result of membership.

“Our growers have entrusted us to represent them at the local and state level. It’s a privilege to be a voice for them and now we can provide that same support to even more landowners,” Glauser said.

Advocacy for local GSAs will be heightened as the Tulare Lake Subbasin probationary hearing approaches on April 16. “Every aspect of our economy will feel the effects of the sweeping changes,” Glauser said. “It is imperative that we help educate our communities and work with our GSAs to find equitable groundwater solutions.”

Delta View is hosting an informational event for the new committee on March 12 at 4 p.m., located at St. John’s Hall in Hanford, California.
USDA Announces $40.5 Million in Grant Awards to Support Processing and Promotion of Domestic Organic Products

Selected projects to benefit more than 31.8 million consumers and more than 27,000 producers.

Press release provided by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) today awarded approximately $40.5 million for 69 grant projects through the Organic Market Development Grant program. These projects will support the development of new and existing organic markets, support the infrastructure to improve processing capacity, explore emerging technologies to promote organic products, and purchase equipment to help meet the increasing demand for organic commodities. USDA anticipates the projects funded through this program will benefit more than 27,000 producers and over 31.8 million consumers by increasing organic market opportunities. USDA Deputy SecretaryXCocholl/Torris Small and Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs Jenny Larr Melfitt made the announcement today at National Products Expo West in Anaheim, Calif.

“Farmers who choose to grow Organic often access new, more and better markets,” said Agriculture Deputy Secretary Torres Small. “At USDA, we are committed to making it easier for farmers that make that choice through programs like the Organic Market Development Grant Program, which supports farmers and increases access to fresh, healthy foods. Today’s announcement is just one of the many ways President Biden is investing in rural people and a more resilient food system.”

“This round of awards through the Organic Market Development Grant program will address critical needs within the nation’s growing organic industry — funding projects that further our goals of creating and expanding markets for producers,” said Under Secretary Melfitt. “The program is a key component of USDA’s Organic Transition Initiative and will increase value added agricultural opportunities for organic producers in rural America.”

In May 2023, USDA announced a total of $75 million available through the Organic Market Development Grant program to increase the availability and demand for domestically produced organic agricultural products and to address the need for additional market paths. This second round of Organic Market Development Grant awards for the market development and promotion, simplified equipment-only, and processing capacity expansion project types is funded by the Commodity Credit Corporation. In January 2024, USDA announced $9.75 million for the first round of awards through this program. USDA will make the final award announcement for this program in the coming months.

Recipients of this funding include:

- Almar Orchards LLC in Flushing, Mich., a family-owned organic apple orchard, received funding to purchase and install a washing and sorting line that will enable the orchard to expand into the baby/kid food market. This will result in increased domestic sourcing and the orchard will serve as an aggregator for other growers in the region. The increased capacity will also allow Almar to expand organic apple production onto 100 additional acres.
- The Georgia Organic Peanut Association, Inc., in Camilla, Ga., is using grant funds in a partnership with Oliver Oil Company, a small family-owned processor of cold-pressed culinary oil, to acquire parallel processing equipment that will enable, for the first time in the Southeast, the production of certified organic peanut oil. As a result of this project, one processing facility and one storage facility are expected to achieve organic certification for the first time, fostering a new local supply chain for certified organic commodities.
- Big Sandy Organics, LLC in Big Sandy, Mont., received a grant to increase processing capacity for organic grains and pulse crops by acquiring advanced equipment to enhance product quality, reduce labor-intensive processes, and reduce production costs. The project will also expand the organic market by promoting collaborative product development and diversification.
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Farm Bureau Continues to Help Fight Hunger Through Harvest for All Program

Press release provided by the American Farm Bureau Federation

Farm and ranch families from across the nation donated 31 million pounds of food and raised $425,879 to help fight hunger and assist in other community service outreach in 2023 through Farm Bureau’s “Harvest for All” program. Combined, the monetary and food donations totaled the equivalent of 26 million meals.

Criteria for tracking Harvest for All donations included dollars and pounds of food donated by state and county Farm Bureaus, as well as volunteer hours, reported from the grassroots up as part of the annual campaign.

The spirit of farm communities has always been one of working together and giving back. Now in its 22nd year, Harvest for All is spearheaded by members of Farm Bureau’s Young Farmers & Ranchers program, but members of all ages from across the nation contribute to the effort. Their participation helps ensure Americans who are facing food insecurity can enjoy the bounty of food farmers and ranchers produce.

In addition to raising food and funds, farmers and ranchers tallied 21,571 hours in local food insecurity efforts and other community service.

“People from all walks of life, including many rural Americans and residents of farming communities, remain concerned about addressing hunger,” said Kevin Lussier of Florida, chair of AFBF’s YF&R Committee. “Farm Bureau’s commitment to helping put food on the tables of those in need through Harvest for All remains strong.”

Florida Farm Bureau took top honors for donating the most food in 2023, 22 million pounds. This included conducting donation drives focused on peanut butter and canned food in addition to produce-growing projects, helping local farmers pick produce from fields after harvest for donation to local food pantries. Florida Farm Bureau also tallied the most volunteer hours through these activities, 15,000.

Michigan Farm Bureau took top honors for raising the most money in 2023, $222,000. Numerous fundraising activities conducted with the assistance of the Michigan Farm Bureau family of companies yielded this impressive total.

Thanks to the generosity of Nationwide, these state organizations received a $50 grant (for each type of contribution) for donation to a local food bank of their choice or for another Harvest for All project. Second-place winners were New York Farm Bureau for 8 million pounds of food donated, Illinois Farm Bureau for more than 2,500 hours of donated volunteer time and Pennsylvania Farm Bureau for $73,000 in donated funds.

Each of the second-place winners received a $250 grant from Nationwide to donate to the local food bank of their choice.

Most Innovative Winner

In addition, the North Carolina Farm Bureau YF&R Committee received a $250 grant from Nationwide for “most innovative” program. They raised more than $18,000 and collected 100,000 pounds of food at a charity shooting event hosted to benefit food banks in the state.

The awards were presented during AFBF’s Young Farmers & Ranchers Leadership Conference, held March 8-11 in Omaha, Nebraska.

Since Harvest for All was launched, Farm Bureau families have gathered 468 million pounds of food, logged more than 250,000 volunteer hours and raised nearly $11.5 million in donations. In 2023, AFBF earned a prestigious Power of Associations Summit Award from the American Society of Association Executives, in recognition of Harvest for All’s success in addressing hunger in rural America over the past 20-plus years.
Research Farm Seeks Help as Income Falls

By Ching Lee, Assistant Editor, Ag Alert

Reprinted with permission by the California Farm Bureau Federation

Use of micro-irrigation may be commonplace in California orchard systems today, but the practice of applying precise water to individual plants rather than broadcasting with sprinklers may not have taken off if not for the research trials conducted decades ago at the Nickels Soil Laboratory in Colusa County.

The privately owned research farm in Arbuckle is often credited with helping to propel the state’s tree nut industry to the powerhouse it is today. Through its demonstration research projects, Nickels showed growers management techniques that allowed them to produce higher yields on marginal soils. This led to dramatic expansion in acreage and changed the agricultural landscape of the Central Valley.

Just as growers have faced tough times in recent years as the price of almonds and walnuts has plummeted, research funding for Nickels has depleted because of shrinking crop revenue. That’s because the so-called “soil lab” operates as a 200-acre working farm, sustaining its research largely from crop sales, it faces funding shortfalls as revenue drops and costs rise. It seeks financial support, such as for the fungicide being applied above, donated by Syngenta. (Photo: Ching Lee)

The Colusa County Board of Supervisors and the Colusa Irrigation District provide added support. Of the 200 acres, about half of it is currently in production: 81 acres of almonds, 9 acres of walnuts and 2 acres of table olives. The rest is open ground and roads, with a shop that houses farming equipment. Despite its name, there is no actual lab with test tubes and beakers at the site.

The farm sells its almonds to Blue Diamond Growers in Sacramento, walnuts to Mariani Nut Co. in Winters and olives to Musco Family Olive Co. in Tracy.

Early projects introduced growers to drip irrigation, which Edstrom described as perhaps the most important technological advancement that allowed growers to increase acreage and production. He noted that when he managed Nickels, California had 300,000 to 400,000 acres of almonds. There were 1.56 million acres in 2023, according to the almond board.

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As a working farm, Nickels can produce crops at a commercial scale, which allows growers to see how certain practices work in real life, he said. Various researchers, himself included, have used the farm for experiments, he noted. Nickels shares research results at annual field days, set for May 7 this year, Niederholzer said.

“I don’t find another place in California that can connect all the different dots—from basic research to very applied research to education and outreach,” Saa said. “Losing something like that would be very detrimental for the industry.”

The property, originally an almond orchard, once belonged to Leslie Nickels, who died in 1959. His will specified that the land should be used for research that benefits growers who farm on marginal soils, as opposed to prime farmland along river bottoms that was already the subject of other research, said John Edstrom, UCCE farm advisor emeritus who managed Nickels Soil Lab from 1984 to 2011. It was Edstrom’s predecessor, UC farm advisor Tom Aldrich, who learned of the will and initiated research on the property in the 1970s.

Under an agreement reached in 1982 with the Leslie J. Nickels Trust, which owns the land, the university manages and coordinates research activities and farming practices. Aside from farm advisors’ salaries, no UC money flows to Nickels Soil Lab, Niederholzer said. The trust employs a half-time farm manager and two full-time workers. An advisory committee reviews research proposals and makes recommendations to Nickels trustees.

Edstrom noted much of the acreage growth has occurred in areas that previously did not support commercial tree nut production, proving that Leslie Nickels “was prophetic in realizing that if the industry was going to advance, it needed to expand its productivity onto marginal soils.” He said successful plantings of almonds and walnuts at Nickels Soil Lab gave growers the confidence to plant orchards where they otherwise probably wouldn’t have planted.

Other key research at Nickels included the evaluation of new rootstocks and almond varieties, higher-density plantings, fertilizer application and minimum pruning.

“Almond growers, we’re all in this together,” Rominger said, “and they figure out a way to address them and hopefully find some solutions.”

To donate to Nickels Soil Lab, go to https://myaglife.com/fundraiser/.

Colusa County almond grower Gerry Rominger farms about 3 miles from Nickels Soil Lab and has been a regular attendee of its field days. As someone who does not farm on first-class soil, he said he appreciates the work done at the site, some of which can outright kill the crop but provides useful information for growers. Using concepts developed at Nickels, he said, “you can raise as good of a crop as anywhere in the state.”

“Every year, the number of people who stop by there is increasing,” Rominger said. “They do a lot of things on the fringe that are extremely important to us as growers and help us in our day-to-day decisions.”

For example, in one study, the farm purposely attracted a type of beetle to its walnut orchard to see how damaging the pest really is, Niederholzer said. In another trial, researchers tested how well almond trees survive without irrigation.

Current projects include an experiment involving whole orchard recycling to see the effects of grinding entire trees into chips and incorporating the wood into the soil before planting. An ongoing study compares the self-pollinating Independence almond variety with the traditional Nonpareil variety. Niederholzer said there are also plans to plant high-density olive trees for oil. Other research priorities include regenerative agriculture and climate-savvy practices that allow growers to reduce greenhouse gases, he added.
What Does It Mean to Be a Disciple of Christ?

By Joshua Stevens
Faith Contributor, Valley Ag Voice

Imagine the excitement of the disciples fresh off returning from a journey in which they saw God move powerfully through them as they preached the gospel and healed many, then returning to Christ to tell Him of all they had accomplished in His name. Put yourself in their shoes, having the opportunity to tell the living Christ of the things you witnessed while ministering.

Think of how you might feel if, while telling Christ these things, you look up and see thousands of people flocking towards you. People who have heard of this miracle worker, people who are curious about the things He has said, skeptics, people from all walks of life clamoring to see the spectacle of Jesus Christ — then to see this wave of people being warmly welcomed and taught by Christ himself while those who came in search of healing found it. Being told to pass out a few loaves of bread and some fish to feed the thousands gathered and then picking up the leftovers and receiving more than what you started with. Certainly, the disciples must have felt exuberant after experiencing and witnessing such miracles.

There must have been excited murmurs amongst the twelve after the crowds left. While Christ prayed — then to see this wave of people being warmly welcomed and taught by Christ himself while those who came in search of healing found it. Being told to pass out a few loaves of bread and some fish to feed the thousands gathered and then picking up the leftovers and receiving more than what you started with. Certainly, the disciples must have felt exuberant after experiencing and witnessing such miracles.

So, how do we apply this to our lives today? How do we follow Christ if we have never done anything remarkable or seen anything remarkable? What can we do to follow Christ in the same Ways the disciples did?

First, a disciple must desire to follow Christ. They are not compelled to or commanded to by a natural or supernatural force. But they have decided to follow Christ for reasons both known and unknown, seen and unseen.

Secondly, they must deny themselves of the flesh and the ambitions of the world, deny themselves of a priority of materialistic belongings, and deny themselves of all that would inhibit their desire to pursue Christ.

Finally, they must dedicate themselves to this pursuit of Christ. They must, daily, set their minds to desiring following Christ and seek after Christ and His teachings. In doing so, they would embody what it means to be a disciple.

Again, think of how they must have felt in that sobering moment. Certainly, the imagery of “take up his cross daily” would have caused a deep gulp or drop of the heart. Coming off of the spiritual high after seeing miracles and thousands being taught of the coming kingdom to be reminded that, to become a disciple, they must live a life astounding different than the life they had led before being called to Christ’s ministry altogether. Though we know each of them stumbled and failed along the path of discipleship, we are lucky each of them dedicated not just themselves to the task of being a follower of Christ but bestowed it upon all whom they taught as utmost importance so we can continue living a life worthy of the Christ who saved us.

Will you pray with me?

Dear Lord, thank you for the breath you have given us. The freedom with which you have allowed us to choose to seek after Christ and the reward of pride, knowing we can help contribute to your almighty plan. Guide each of us as we desire to seek after You, deny ourselves the pleasures of the world that would separate us from You and Your will, and dedicate ourselves daily to the tasks you have given us. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

SAVE-THE-DATE
FOR THESE AGRICULTURE EVENTS

As the first full month of the spring season, April promises new life and growth after the winter months — not to mention a few fun activities casting a fresh look on the agriculture industry.

NETWORKING & TRADE SHOWS
Starting strongly, the California Antique Farm Equipment show on April 19-21 is sure to be a great experience with historical value. Attendees can visit agriculture’s past and learn about antique tractors, engines, equipment, and more!

The three-day show at the Tulare International Agri-Center will feature various activities, antiques, boutiques, swap meets, an antique equipment auction, contests, a tractor pull, and a parade. For more information, call (559) 688-1030 or email antique@farmshow.org.

Another trade show and networking event — the 2024 Spotlight Ag Social — will take place on April 26 at the Madera Municipal Golf Course from 9:30 am to 3:30 p.m. Toated as one of the best Ag networking events, over 750 growers and 120 vendors from various sectors of the ag industry are expected to attend.

The event is free to attend for growers who can expect free food, drinks, and guest speakers discussing key subjects affecting the ag industry. Following the speaker lineup, a general raffle and gun raffle will take place — part of the proceeds will be donated to the Madera High School FFA.

Following the social, an after-party will commence at 4 p.m. with live music from Joe Peters, drinks, and food from Sugar Pine Steakhouse.

EDUCATION
The 2024 North San Joaquin Almond Day on April 4 will be hosted at the Modesto Centre Plaza from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Put on by UC ANR, the event offers continuing education credits as well as valuable information about the almond industry. Contact (209) 525-6800 to learn more.

Another UC ANR event is taking place on April 28 for 4-H officers. The 4-H Officer Retreat & Workshop will take place from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. in El Dorado County, California. The event is intended for current 4-H youth officers and others interested in running for a club office next year.

ENTERTAINMENT
You’ve heard of Farm-to-Fork but what about Farm to Fiddle? By popular demand, Fresno Philharmonic is hosting the third annual Farm to Fiddle Dinner Party, combining two signature creations a la Central Valley — food and music.

The event takes place on April 23 from 5:30 pm to 9 pm at The Barn at the River Parkway, bringing an evening of local wine and cocktails, a grazing table, and a performance by Rei Hotoda and members of the Fresno Philharmonic.

A farm-style dinner will feature local specialties. Proceeds from the event will support the music and education programming of the Fresno Philharmonic. Call (559) 261-0600 for ticket information.

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