Placing Central Valley’s Dairy Industry and Wetlands in Focus

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Wetlands are the Earth’s largest natural source of methane — a potent greenhouse gas roughly 30 times more powerful than carbon dioxide at warming the atmosphere — according to the Department of Energy’s Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Methane is a key point of controversy among dairy producers and the environmental justice community given that dairy and livestock are responsible for over half of California’s methane emissions, according to the California Air Resources Board.

However, a peer-reviewed paper recently published by CABI Biological Sciences argues that the state’s dairy sector can reach climate neutrality in the coming years through aggressive methane mitigation which almost no other sector can achieve.

“If the dairy sector can continue to decrease methane, it can reduce its warming contribution,” Frank Mitloehner, director of the CLEAR Center at UC Davis said. “Other sectors of society can’t do that as easily, but dairy can because the main greenhouse gas it produces is methane. If we reduce that methane, not only can we reach climate neutrality, but we can also chip away at historical emissions, and the sector can become part of a climate solution.”

The dairy industry’s commitment to reducing methane emissions is evidenced by several initiatives such as dairy digesters which reduce greenhouse gas emissions by roughly 2 million metric tons per year according to CARB. Yet, environmental groups such as the Center for Food Safety, claim that digesters are false climate solutions.

In a CFS article, authors Rebecca Spector, West Coast Director, and Dashel Murawski, Communications and Development Associate, stated that digesters incentivize increased herds and thereby increase emissions.

WETLAND EMISSIONS

On the other hand, wetlands preservation and restoration have been championed through both political and environmental initiatives as a way to combat climate change. According to the United States Geological Survey within the Department of Interior, wetlands capture large quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses from the atmosphere to store in its soil and plants — commonly known as carbon sequestration.

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Blueprint and Metropolitan Water District of Southern California Sign Historic MOU

By Scott Hamilton
President, Hamilton Resource Economics

On May 8, 2024, in Sacramento, representatives for the Water Blueprint for the San Joaquin Valley (Blueprint) and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (Metropolitan) signed a historic memorandum of understanding (MOU). The purpose of the MOU is to establish the intent of collaboration between the Parties to identify, develop, and implement projects in the San Joaquin Valley that have mutual benefits for managing water supplies, including storing and recovering water.

Many areas within the San Joaquin Valley face significant water shortages and/or lack the funds to build the infrastructure needed to convey and recharge high-flow water. With too little money and too little water, these areas face an uncertain future. The State Water Resources Control Board (State Board) has come out aggressively by putting the Tulare Lake Subbasin on probation, charging $20/af to pump groundwater and $300/well/year. Those fees just cover administrative costs. None of that money will be used to improve water supplies. The reality is that if landowners don’t take the initiative to improve the sustainability of the groundwater, the State Board will step in and provide more costly solutions that are likely not nearly as effective as what the water districts would do themselves. What solutions exist for districts with limited funds and insufficient water?

Metropolitan has been banking water in Kern County for decades now, with programs in Arvin Edison, Semitropic, and Kern Delta water storage districts. The original fears that Metropolitan would adversely impact groundwater users through these programs have proved unfounded. Rather, in some cases, the programs bring in more water than they take out and provide a new source of funding for infrastructure. After three years of severe drought that led them to the brink of extensive and severe water rationing, Metropolitan is looking to increase the reliability of its supply. Currently, they are exploring surface and groundwater storage opportunities and aspiring to broaden their portfolio of

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Revised State Budget Cuts $500 Million for Water Storage, Sites Reservoir Slowly Inching Forward

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Governor Gavin Newsom’s May Revision of the state budget plan released on May 10, aims to address a “sizable deficit” of roughly $36 billion into 2026. The multi-billion-dollar deficit is in stark contrast to the $97.5 billion budget surplus that Newsom projected in the 2022-23 state budget.

Several budget cuts, amounting to over $30 billion, were announced, including a $500 million cut to water storage projects. These discretionary spending cuts delay certain funding sources for water-storage projects such as the planned Sites Reservoir north of Sacramento. While funding awarded under Proposition 1 — a voter-approved 2014 ballot initiative to support various water projects — will not be affected by the budget crisis, the California Farm Bureau explained in a press release that $500 million in discretionary funding to support the project would be cut.
President’s Message

By Jenny Holtermann
President, KCFB

Grassroots organizations, like the Kern County Farm Bureau, were created as a means to provide farmers and ranchers with an advocate voice. These organizations only work when those voices are heard and when true two-way communication is happening. In February, we started what I hope will become an annual series of Tailgate Talks. We designed Tailgate Talks to bring key issues to KCFB. As farmers and agriculturalists, we are busy people. Attending meetings and workshops can be overwhelming, and traveling to Bakersfield from our farms can be an all-day event. Tailgate Talks allow us to bring those key issues to you.

February kickstarted the Tailgate Talks with three topics: DWR technical assistance, Card Check overview, and CAL/OSHA updates from the first of the year. We brought these topics to Western Stockman’s feedlot to come to the county’s North end and meet farmers closer to the fields.

Our second Tailgate Talk of the year is scheduled for June 5 at 11 a.m. at the Buttonwillow Lion’s Den. We have the privilege of hosting two knowledgeable speakers. Bryan Little, a representative from FELS, will enlighten us about the new indoor heat illness requirements and WVPP (Workplace Violence Prevention Program). Stephanie Hearn of GEI and the SGMA Coordination Committee will provide an update and status overview of the SGMA. Their expertise and insights promise to make this event highly informative and beneficial for all attendees.

These are two very important updates. FELS is a Farm Bureau organization that assists farm employers in complying with agriculture labor laws and avoiding labor relations problems. They work together to ensure farm employers know the latest laws and regulations and work in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., to prevent more stringent policies. Indoor Heat Illness and WVPP are two new programs that farmers will need to comply with.

The SGMA Coordination Committee has been meeting weekly along with a Technical Committee of stakeholders, water district representatives, water engineers, and consultants to ensure our Kern Basin SGMA plan is well organized and that management is on the same page. Stephanie will present how things are different this time around—as they work on yet another revision to the SGMA plan. I have heard from multiple interests about the desire to increase coordination and work together. I know many of us would find it educational to get an update on the plan and status overview.

Our decision to host the event in Buttonwillow is aimed at attracting more members and farmers from the west side of Kern County. These events are a privilege for our members, offering them a unique opportunity to stay informed and engaged. Even if you are not a member, we welcome you to attend and consider joining our community. Membership offers a range of benefits, and we will be accepting sign-ups at the event. We are committed to hosting these grassroots events to ensure our members are well-informed and connected to the issues that impact our industry.

At the end of the summer, we hope to have another Tailgate Talk geared toward elections. Kern County Farm Bureau is actively meeting with political candidates over the next few months. If we decide to endorse candidates, we will host a meet-and-greet with them so members can speak directly to them.

Not just educational opportunities but also two-way communication are necessities of grassroots organizations. At events or at any time, our members can call or email us with any issue they need help with. The Farm Bureau is here for you—we are your voice. If we do not know your issues, we cannot help you. Let us know how we can help.

Executive Director’s Report

By Rachel Nettleton
Exec. Director, KCFB

Last month, I had the incredible opportunity to join my classmates of the 2024 Leadership Farm Bureau class in Washington, D.C. Our days were filled with a whirlwind of activities designed to equip us with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate the intricacies of agricultural advocacy on the national stage. From policy briefings and advocacy training to meetings with key decision-makers, each moment was a chance to deepen our understanding and sharpen our advocacy skills. Throughout the trip, our schedules were packed with engaging sessions, interactive workshops, and informational briefings that broadened our perspectives and honed our abilities.

On the first day, we engaged directly with leaders at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Meeting with Deputy Secretary Xochilt Torres Small and other agricultural officials allowed us to convey the unique challenges and opportunities facing California farmers and ranchers. These interactions were important for building relationships that will serve us well in the future. To close the afternoon, we had the opportunity to walk the halls of Capitol Hill alongside Congressman Doug LaMalfa, which was a surreal experience that brought the legislative process to life and set the tone for the impactful days that followed.

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Executive Director’s Report
Continued from PAGE 2

On day two, as we met with Capitol representatives, the significance of our collective voice and the potential impact of grassroots advocacy became evident. These conversations, particularly focused on the Farm Bill, underscored the transformative potential of cooperative engagement and informed decision-making in driving agricultural policy forward. Interacting with representatives such as Congressman Jim Costa and Congressman Doug LaMalfa showed the importance of articulating the priorities and concerns of California agriculture on a national level.

In addition to these important discussions, our day was further enriched by a meeting with the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, where we had the opportunity to hear from Dr. John Newton, the committee’s Chief Economist. His insights into the economic forces driving agricultural policy provided valuable context and reinforced the importance of evidence-based advocacy in our efforts. This session underscored the need for informed and strategic approaches when advocating for agricultural interests.

To close out the day, we visited the Canadian Embassy, which highlighted the global dimensions of agriculture and the importance of international trade and collaboration. These discussions emphasized the interconnectedness of our industry and the necessity of cooperation across borders. It was a powerful reminder that agricultural issues are not confined to national borders but are part of a global network.

This is just a glimpse into the series of events we experienced last month. Our experience in the nation’s capital was a blend of education, advocacy, and relationship-building that laid the groundwork for meaningful policy influence for our agriculture communities. As our time in Washington, D.C., came to a close, I felt a sense of gratitude for the experiences and connections created during our trip. I left feeling empowered and inspired to advocate for the interests of California agriculture, both locally and nationally. This trip was more than just an educational experience; it was a call to action to be a dedicated and informed advocate for the agricultural community.

Young Farmers & Ranchers

Spring has been quite busy for the Kern Young Farmers and Ranchers. In April, we started off with a Saturday morning tour of a non-profit horse rescue operation in Shafter. Known as “All Seated in A Barn,” the facility has rehabilitated hundreds of horses and donkeys. They also house a few exotic animals, including zebras and a very friendly yak named “Yaki-Chan”.

Our group gathered early in the morning for a brief meeting and breakfast burritos, then received a wonderful tour. LeAnn, our guide, told us background stories about the animals, including their previous lives and now thriving personalities. Some had been with them many years while others, such as four particularly skittish horses, just arrived the week prior, having been purchased off auction and saved from slaughter. We stepped inside one of the animal pens for a few minutes to give some close-up pets to a few horses and donkeys. The animals loved the attention! We also fed a few treats along the way. Smelling the hay feed reminded me of smelling alfalfa growing in the fields next to my house as a child. I lived on the “edge” of town, back when Norris Road marked the transition from subdivisions to rural crops. Before the housing boom of the early 2000s, our little neighborhood was surrounded by acres and acres of almond trees and alfalfa fields. I remember driving past sheep grazing in the springtime, always looking out to spot some cute lambs.

We appreciated our tour at All Seated in A Barn and hope to spread the word about their efforts. Please note that they often host family-friendly events and it’s very easy to coordinate a tour.

Next up, the Kern YFR&R group hosted a meeting at Cal State University, Bakersfield, in conjunction with their Ag Business Club. We are grateful to Dr. Aaron Hegle, who helped us coordinate the time and advertise to the ag department. He even provided dinner! It was great to meet the students and collaborate with their ag club. There were nearly 30 in attendance. One of my goals this year is to facilitate a working relationship with college students and let them know about our group, and I believe our meeting was a great starting point. We brought in Alex Dominguez, 1st Vice President of the Farm Bureau, as a guest speaker. As a CSUB alumnus, Alex spoke on his transition from college to his career as a water law attorney for Klein DeNatale Goldiner. I found his story engaging and full of honest advice while giving credit to supporting mentors along the way.

One thing in particular stood out to me during the Q&A time. I asked Alex what he felt his role was at the Farm Bureau. His reply was simple yet clear - “I like to think of myself as helping ag tell their story.” Is that not what the Farm Bureau stands for? Is that not what all of us are aiming for, each with our unique backgrounds and experiences? Some may not have significant ties to agriculture. For others, it’s their entire way of life. Personally, I have no background in agriculture, but was exposed through my career and eventually realized this is where I belong. My husband has more experience than I ever did—he grew up raising steers in 4-H, and his grandpa was a cowboy on Tejon ranch.

How can we awaken those stories within us and communicate them to the modern world? I believe we all have some connection to agriculture. Don’t let your story get lost in silence. Pass it on to the next generation and find a small way to support agriculture, whether through participating in one of the tours that YFR&R hosts or attending an ag club meeting such as the one at CSUB.

YFR&R’s May event at Murray Farms was one more opportunity to hear a story of resilience. Steve Murray graciously invited us to pick blueberries and cherries at his farm next to the Big Red Barn along Highway 58. It was great to hear Steve recount how he started a small cherry farming operation despite all the odds against him. Years of hard work later, he now offers over 100 commodities at two retail locations and participates in several dozen farmer’s markets. We’ve been invited back year after year, and this seems to be one of our most popular events. With about 25 people and some kids attending, we finished the evening with a barbecue. A big thank you to Steve and Vickie Murray for hosting us!

If you want to keep up with the Kern Young Farmers & Ranchers, please email us or follow us on social media using the credentials below. Please save the date for our next event on June 22 in Kernville. Also, on July 20, we will put on our annual Charity Farmers Market at the Chuy’s parking lot on Rosedale Highway. Please contact us for details.

Email: KernYFR@KernCFB.com
Instagram: @Kern_YFR
Facebook: KernYoungFarmersAndRanchers
Collaborating in New Ways to Reduce Carbon Emissions and Provide Solutions

By Chevron

For over a century, Chevron has played a major role in helping meet California’s energy needs. The oil and gas we produce are critical to enabling human progress. From the cars we drive to the tractors that grow our crops, to medical advancements, technological innovations, and thousands of consumer products, we develop the energy that improves lives and powers California forward.

We all want an energy system that is lower carbon. That requires driving down CO₂ emissions intensity across every sector of the economy – and on a global scale.

Chevron is working on both fronts, applying our strengths where they are needed most – reducing the carbon intensity of our operations and investing to lower the cost and risk of new technologies that can help build viable lower carbon solutions and industries of the future.

We sit at the center of one of the world’s greatest challenges: delivering lower carbon energy to meet the world’s rising energy demand.

Multiple solutions will be required – no one country, no one company, no one industry acting alone can meet the world’s energy and climate goals.

At Chevron, we are leveraging our strengths to safely deliver lower carbon energy to a growing world.

We’re working to deploy integrated lower-carbon products and solutions to:

- Reduce the carbon intensity of our operations.
- Help reduce emissions of industries that enable modern society by advancing lower carbon solutions like renewable fuels; hydrogen, carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS); offsets; and emerging technologies.
- Collaborate in new ways with innovators, policymakers, communities, and customers to accelerate progress.

In our San Joaquin Valley Business Unit, we have team members dedicated to lower carbon projects that deliver the affordable, reliable, ever-cleaner energy that enables human progress. We’re working hard every day to solve today’s complex energy challenges, inspire for tomorrow, and power progress in Central California.

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Dairy Industry and Wetlands

Continued from PAGE 1

A 2015 study from the U.S. Geological Survey found that restored wetlands can release large amounts of methane that reduce or negate carbon sequestration benefits. USGS looked into restored wetlands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in 2010-2011 to inform the study.

“The anaerobic conditions that promote CO₂ sequestration also make wetlands the largest natural source of [methane] emissions to the atmosphere,” according to the study.

Wetlands are known as carbon sinks — meaning they hold the capacity to store large amounts of carbon — but they are also one of the largest emitters of methane. A research team from Berkeley Lab studied wetland sites in the Arctic-Boreal region and found that from 2002 to 2021, wetlands released an average of 20 teragrams of methane — equivalent to the weight of about 55 Empire State buildings.

While the study focused on wetlands in high latitudes, roughly one-third of total methane emissions came from wetlands, according to NASA. This is a result of waterlogged soils and permafrost — which make them carbon sinks — but when wetland soils warm or flood, carbon is released into the atmosphere as methane.

REACHING CARBON NEUTRALITY

The California dairy industry is projected to reach climate neutrality as early as 2027 according to the CABI Biological Sciences study. Forty-five percent of California’s annual methane is produced by dairy farms and, as a result, Senate Bill 1383 was instilled to mandate a 40% reduction in dairy emissions by 2030.

Since then, the industry has generally taken an aggressive approach to reducing its footprint including 236 dairy digesters that collect and harvest methane from 254 farms. According to the study, digesters will achieve 42.6% of SB 1383 goals, and in order to meet the remaining reduction goals, 420 additional projects will be necessary.

“Given the success observed to this point, there is the potential for the industry to achieve its 2030 climate goals and these scenarios to be accomplished,” the study explained. “For additional consideration, it is important to note that approximately one-fifth of all California dairies have either constructed or are planning to build a privately financed or public-private partnership digester.”

The study also notes that while the state’s dairy industry plays a large role in GHG emissions, the majority of emissions fall outside the scope of California’s dairy industry as roughly 80% of the national herd is located in other states.

Increasing dairy digester projects, improving manure management, and utilizing feed additives are all necessary to reach climate neutrality by 2027, according to the study.

“This will require widespread adoption of methane-reduction projects by California’s dairy farmers,” the study concluded.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

While both the dairy industry and wetlands are significant sources of methane emissions, they are equally important to components of California’s ecosystem and economy. The dairy industry’s commitment to reducing methane emissions through dairy digesters and other mitigation strategies demonstrates a proactive approach to environmental sustainability as well as the potential to reach climate neutrality as early as 2027.

Additionally, dairy is the top commodity in the state, generating over $7.4 billion out of California’s nearly $50 billion agriculture industry, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

Despite arguments that the dairy industry cannot be sustainable, most producers in California are invested in reducing emissions, and taking an aggressive approach, according to the CABI study, will likely lead to the achievement of California’s 40% methane reduction goal.

Comparatively, while wetlands are major emitters of methane, they also provide habitat and food sources. According to USGS atmospheric scientist Frank Anderson, not all restored wetlands are necessarily GHG emission sources, but they should be continually monitored.

Against politics and environmental initiatives, both California’s dairy industry and wetlands have a place in the state’s climate goals.
from a bull customer. I always appreciate getting calls from folks who have purchased bulls from us as almost all of them are my friends and I am humbled by their patronage. I use the word “appreciate” referring to the call rather than “enjoy” because sometimes I enjoy the message of success. Sometimes, I appreciate feedback on what we can be doing better. For this particular call I am referencing, I enjoyed. This customer and friend who runs a no-nonsense commercial operation told me of a Hereford cross cow that they had just sold that had given them 14 calves. He was very happy with what hybrid vigor had provided his operation in terms of longevity and fertility. It made me realize that we would be living large if ranchers had a whole herd of cows capable of what this cow did.

Thinking about the call later, I realized that in today’s market, that cow has produced roughly $25,000 in progeny! Then, I started thinking about the marketing demands of today’s calf market and wondered — “What is keeping folks from aiming their genetic selection at this target?” Current market forces are pushing the limits of YW and carcass traits to produce calves that maximize end-product value, but what is the cost to your cowherd (factory) of these genetics being introduced for multiple generations? In western ranching, there is a threshold of cow size where too big of a cow results in lost efficiency and fertility, and too small results in progeny that lack marketability. Commercial producers need to make sure that their seed stock provider has a strong grasp of this threshold. If I am pitching bulls that are purely aimed at maximizing growth, ribeye area, and marbling I may be offering shiny nickels to a commercial cattlemen that is throwing away dollars if he raises his own replacement heifers.

Let’s use a reasonable example that isn’t exaggerated, using two herds and estimating a calf price of $2,000. Let’s say there is a commercial herd (herd A) that has purely used bulls to maximize growth and carcass and has produced a cow herd that averages four calves before coming up open, another cow herd (herd B) has used genetics emphasizing fertility and longevity and only moderate growth and carcass traits, however the more range adapted “B” cow herd averages six calves per cow before coming up open. Because of the end product genetics of the calves of herd A, those calves receive a $200 premium at market, making them worth $2,200 per head. The herd “B” calves receive no premium and get $2,000 per head. The average lifetime production of the herd A cow is $8,800 with the premium. The average lifetime production of the herd B cow is $12,000. herd B has a distinct advantage before you even take into account the the added cost of replacements herd A will incur due to high turnover. There is no premium that will match fertility.

Industry experts have mistakenly told folks over the years that fertility has very low heritability; this is absolutely untrue. This mistaken assumption is due to the fact that overall fertility results from a combination of many traits. Fertility is a function of soundness, foraging ability, instincts and behavior, and more, all traits that are highly heritable! Regardless of breed, shop for genetics that can satisfy market demands but maximize fertility. Don’t get distracted by shiny nickels in the form of program premiums that will cost dollars in your cowherd.
Oxbo Deepens Roots in Central Valley with Bakersfield Opening

Oxbo’s tech solutions aim to mitigate agricultural labor challenges.

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Oxbo, a global farm machinery and equipment company, opened its new Bakersfield location on April 30, further extending its reach in the Central Valley and promising a close partnership with Kern County customers. The company now holds six locations in California and has been established internationally, including but not limited to Europe and Brazil.

Equipment is primarily geared toward the specialty crop industry and, over the past 60 years, Oxbo has become a staple in specialty harvest and controlled application technology. In 2023, Oxbo expanded this portfolio through the acquisitions of H&S Manufacturing and Westside Equipment Co.

The acquisition of Westside Equipment — a Central Valley manufacturer for specialty crops in Madera, Crows Landing, Woodland, and Five Points — was dually designed to deepen Oxbo’s presence in California and expand its fruit division.

According to Regional Sales Manager Gabriel Giesick, opening a location in Bakersfield is a natural progression of the company’s goals in serving farmers in both northern and southern California. “Thirty to forty percent of the pistachios harvested are south of the Tulare line, and we were ill-served and underserved down here in Kern County, so we needed to be where the farmers are to take care of them,” Giesick said.

Before its acquisition, Westside Equipment had acquired Vmch — a vineyard mechanization manufacturer in Fresno. In its current portfolio, Oxbo supplies harvesters and specialty equipment for berry, coffee, grape, olive, pistachio, and tomato growers.

Oxbo, uniquely, is described as a one-stop shop for farmers to pick up parts, receive service, and add new purchases to their fleet. No dealer is mediating between the manufacturer and the customer, Giesick explained. From raw steel to the product to the customer, Oxbo is involved in every part of the equipment’s life, including on-site demos and service repairs.

“If something goes wrong with the equipment, the welder who welded it will likely be in the truck with me coming out to fix it. If the electrician has a bad wiring harness, he’ll be in the truck with me driving out to fix it,” Giesick said. “From a farmer’s and a grower’s standpoint, they should know that they’re getting service after the sale and we’re not afraid to take care of what we sell and what we sold because we built it. We’re built farmer tough for farmers.”

Robert Huckaby, president of the Oxbo Fruit Division, echoed this sentiment, explaining that there’s no “middleman” between the maker and the purchaser. This philosophy resulted in the new Bakersfield location — a central point for Kern County growers to receive local support.

“It is the ability to be right here locally because we sell direct, we service direct, we sell parts direct, do all the warranty direct, so we need to be close to the customer...we’re A to Z — once you buy a piece of equipment from us, you don’t have to deal with anybody else,” Huckaby said.

LABOR AND TECHNOLOGY

The primary goal of the Bakersfield location is to reduce the necessity for manual labor. With the cost of agricultural labor on a seemingly continuous incline, growers are looking to technology to keep operations running.

According to Cory Venable, director of sales and marketing for Oxbo’s fruit division, the equipment company is working toward alternative solutions and technologies to limit the amount of manual intervention during harvest.

“If we’re able to cover more ground with less labor, that makes the growers more money. And the challenge to get labor just in general is a big thing,” Venable said.

He explained that their technology is designed for the overall care of the crop to ensure it does not damage softer, specialty crops such as produce.

“Just like if you went out with your hand and picked an individual berry off or an individual tomato, we want to make sure that care, that crop care, is there,” Venable said.

According to a report from UC Davis, the average hourly earnings of the state’s farm workers received $19.75 in 2022, 12% higher than the U.S. average of $17.55. Coupled with high input costs and rising inflation, the demand for labor remains high, but the likelihood of sustaining the cost is dismal.

Oxbo’s solution employs a “less is more” strategy wherein the technology increases the yield and bottom-line input cost to the grower. Instead of hiring several workers, only a few highly skilled operators are required, Giesick explained.

Equipped with Artificial Intelligence, Oxbo’s machinery uses sensing technologies to make machine adjustments as well as sorting capabilities to differentiate between the good, the bad, and the ugly.

While this results in fewer jobs, it provides for higher-paying jobs that support the industry’s future as technology and AI applications become increasingly prominent. Within the company, Giesick expects several local jobs to be created, such as salesmen, service technicians, administrative assistants, and parts managers.

Technicians will receive on-the-job training through Oxbo University, to prepare them for the field — they are expected to achieve master mechanic status as well as John Deere and Caterpillar certification.

During harvest season, Oxbo’s team will operate a 24/7 service to growers to help meet any potential demands or setbacks.

“Even if you have a piece of equipment that breaks down at one o’clock in the morning, we will send out mechanics,” Huckaby said. “These guys don’t have time to wait on Friday night. They don’t have time to wait for somebody to open up on a Monday morning. So that’s why we do that. We have mechanics that are on rotation. We have parts guys that are on rotation, so we cover you 24/7 during that harvest interval.”

FUTURE INITIATIVES

Oxbo plans to extend its reach further in the Central Valley and farther south, Huckaby explained. Presently, the company is expanding further to southern regions such as San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties.

In Bakersfield, Oxbo partnered with Cal State University, Bakersfield, and plans to further research initiatives into the needs of specialty crop growers. According to Huckaby, the Oxbo team strives to anticipate the future of growers’ needs and is constantly working on the next generation of equipment and technology.

“If you look at our engineering pipeline, we already have plans of what harvesters we’re going to bring to the market in 2028,” Huckaby said. “We’re doing our research now and, whether or not it’s auto-sensing and GPS-driven and autoloaders and things of that nature, it’s stuff that we’re working on so that we know that we can put it on this new generation piece of equipment that’s going to come out two, three, four years from now.”

As the business grows, Huckaby expects to engage local vendors to further enhance Oxbo’s technology and equipment offerings.

“Bakersfield has some great vendors being such, I mean, they’re either typically number one or number two in the state as far as the county production-wise,” Huckaby said. “So, there are a lot of great resources [and] we’ll be working with those customers here, locally, or those vendors here locally.”

The new Oxbo location is open and can be found at 9323 Enos Lane, Bakersfield, CA 93314.
USDA Cuts Data Collections Programs

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

The USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service hosted a webinar on May 8 to discuss recently discontinued data collection programs and reports, including the July Cattle Inventory, Cotton Objective Yield Survey, and county yield and production estimates for crops and livestock in 2024.

Several 2024 data collection programs were canceled as a result of a roughly 11% congressional budget cut after the appropriation was approved seven months into the federal fiscal year. In March, NASS received a $187.5 million budget for 2024, down from $211.1 million in 2023.

With the loss of the July Cattle Inventory report ranchers will resort to making decisions based on private estimates and without updated information, adding more volatility to an unpredictable cattle market.

Further, county estimates are important determinants in the disbursement of agricultural support payments to farmers and ranchers. According to NASS, county-level estimates serve the agricultural industry as a whole by pinpointing shifts and concentrations, determining sale areas, and providing insight into the current market.

For government agencies, county crop estimates are utilized to calculate Federal Crop Insurance Corporation counts and other crop program payments.

During the webinar Troy Joshua, director of the statistics division at NASS, explained that restoring the July inventory would cost approximately $350,000 while restoring the county estimates would take roughly $7 million.

“We are in a data-producing business,” Joshua said. “If the funding was restored, or if the funding is restored, we will definitely bring the program back because we have heard from our data users how valuable this information is to them.”

On May 3, bipartisan members of the Senate and House penned a letter urging Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to implore the USDA to restore the discontinued reports.

“The [Agricultural Statistics Board] identified budgetary constraints as justification for the decision to discontinue publication of these reports,” the letter said. “While we recognize that NASS has seen a modest year-over-year appropriations reduction, we hold that the costs to industry will be more adverse than the cost savings NASS may realize through cessation of these reports.”

During the webinar, Crops Branch Chief at NASS Lance Honig reiterated that the department realizes the importance of the reports but must adapt to specified funding levels.

“We certainly recognize the value of these data products but had to make some hard decisions to ensure our spending remains within our appropriated total,” Honig said. “We also understand that some alternative data sources are not as robust and not accessible in the same manner as the discontinued products.”
Second-Largest Almond Harvest Predicted for 2024, USDA Adjusts Federal Marketing Order

California almonds are estimated to come in at 3 billion pounds this year according to the 2024 California Almond Forecast published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service on May 10. This marks a 21% increase over 2023’s 2.47 billion pounds.

The report attributes mostly favorable weather conditions from the end of February into early March, which boosted pollinations during the bloom, which finished by the middle of March. While wet weather and warmer temperatures in April heightened pest and disease pressures, water allocation was a non-issue for most growers for the second consecutive year. Further, the forecasted yield is 2,170 pounds per acre, up 380 pounds from the 2023 harvest.

“This larger crop estimate is what the industry expected after a productive bloom this spring, but it is also a testament to the hard work done by almond farmers throughout California during difficult times,” Clarice Turner, president and CEO of the Almond Board of California said in a press release. “Demand for California almonds around the globe continues to grow and our almond farmers constantly deliver on producing high-quality California almonds to meet that demand.”

Five hundred almond growers participated in the survey from April 19 to May 5 for the production forecast, reporting data by mail, online, or over the phone. This report, known as the Subjective Forecast, is the first of two production reports for the upcoming crop year. The second report — Objective Forecast — will be released in July.

The Subjective Forecast is an estimate based on options from a survey of 500 randomly selected almond growers across various regions and operations, while the Objective Forecast is based on actual almond counts in roughly 1,000 orchards.

According to the Almond Board, if the estimated 3 billion pounds holds, 2024 will be the second-largest almond crop on record.

FEDERAL MARKETING ORDER

The USDA modified a federal marketing order on California almonds to aid the creation of alternative markets and keep pace with evolving industry dynamics. According to a press release, the modification seeks to broaden the definition of almonds to include almond biomass for research purposes as well as shelled almonds for future marketing.

Further, the modification — finalized on May 7 — alters election dates within the Almond Board of California to coincide with assessment collections and volume regulation recommendations to the USDA. Any language that requires separate accounting of certain excess funds will be removed and the reserve fund limit will be specified as six months’ expenses.

These alterations to Marketing Order No. 981 — which regulates the handling of almonds grown in California — were made following the Oct. – Nov. 2023 referendum wherein eligible almond growers in the state voted on whether to continue the federal marketing order program. Votes in favor of the new amendments passed by an average of 85.9% of producers who represented 90.7% of the volume of almonds produced, according to the USDA.

Marketing orders are industry-driven programs that leverage funds to design and execute programs a grower could not accomplish individually to achieve marketing success.

These changes to boost market growth for the almond industry come after several trade missions conducted this year by the USDA and Almond Board to expand export markets.

Scouting: Your First Defense Against Pests

Responsible almond farming requires protecting the crop and trees from pests, weeds, and disease through an integrated pest management approach. Using tools and techniques like monitoring for pest levels, help growers use pesticides only when economic thresholds are met.

Scan the QR Codes to learn tips for monitoring and treating pests from industry experts:

How to Combat Webspinning Mites
Monitoring Tools for Navel Orangeworm
Mating Disruption Tools for Navel Orangeworm

Learn more at Almonds.com/IPM
Farmworker advocates and labor groups argued for a union election since 2017. California’s new farm labor organizing law, commonly called “card check,” allows workers to unionize by signing authorization cards instead of voting in secret-ballot elections. The law has generated controversy, with labor unions and employers each accusing the other of coercing farmworkers. (Photo: Caleb Hampton.)

By Caleb Hampton, Assistant Editor, Ag Alert

Reprinted with permission from the California Farm Bureau Federation

California’s new farm labor organizing law has in recent months delivered a series of union wins and a string of competing allegations from employers, farmworkers and labor organizers. In March, Wonderful Nurseries, the nation’s largest grapevine nursery, claimed United Farm Workers Organizers tricked more than a hundred of its workers into unwittingly signing union authorization cards. UFW denied wrongdoing and responded with counter charges against the company.

The dispute, pitting the farmworker union against California’s wealthiest farming family, prompted a weekslong hearing before the California Agricultural Labor Relations Board. An over 800-page decision, which the board said would be released “as quickly as possible,” was issued in January. The board found Wonderful Nurseries, which has donated more than half a billion dollars for programs and infrastructure in the Central Valley and has built schools that serve some of their employees’ children, and the UFW to be in compliance with labor laws. But the board did rule that Wonderful Nurseries’ allegations of worker intimidation and voter suppression were unfounded.

Wonderful Nurseries disputes the decision and has vowed to appeal to the California Court of Appeal. UFW Vice President Erika Navarrete said the decision “closes a chapter in the ongoing dispute between Wonderful Nurseries and the United Farm Workers.”

Agricultural Labor Relations Board and brought an investigative hearing.

On April 22, the day before the hearing began, ALRB General Counsel Jolisa Montgomery filed a complaint against Wonderful Nurseries. In a letter to Wonderful Nurseries employees, Montgomery said, the company had stopped work to bring employees into meetings where they were told the company opposed them joining a union. The complaint said the employer told workers that UFW would deduct $200 from each paycheck (union dues are typically 3%) and that, if they had mistakenly signed authorization cards, the company could help them revoke the cards.

Employees were later invited into a conference room, according to Montgomery, where a team of lawyers and human resources personnel worked with them to prepare the declarations saying they were tricked into signing cards.

Wonderful Nurseries has maintained it was within its rights to educate and support workers who approached the company with questions after learning they had joined a union. Last year, the National Council of Agricultural Employers reported to the USDA allegiations of a “nearly identical” scheme involving pandemic-relief funds by UFW organizers in New York, which passed a card check law for farmworkers in 2019. NCAE, citing Wonderful Nurseries’ allegations, has called for a federal investigation into UFW’s use of the funds.

As the ALRB hears witness testimony in Bakersfield, UFW stands to suffer a loss of credibility if found to have deceived workers. Meanwhile, Wonderful Nurseries could be subject to financial penalties if the agency rules it committed labor violations.

“Last month, California Farm Bureau and other farm groups submitted comments to the ALRB requesting that it allow workers to revoke their cards,” UFW called the allegations against it “categorically false” and characterized farmworkers’ objections as the result of a pressure campaign by Wonderful Nurseries. Over the past two months, the union filed five unfair labor practice charges against the company. “The employer is attempting to overturn the certification workers earned with a campaign of lies and intimidation, denying the workers the opportunity to bargain in good faith for the benefits and improvements that come with a union contract,” Navarrete said in a statement.

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As the ALRB hears witness testimony in Bakersfield, UFW stands to suffer a loss of credibility if found to have deceived workers. Meanwhile, Wonderful Nurseries could be subject to financial penalties if the agency rules it committed labor violations.

“Last month, California Farm Bureau and other farm groups submitted comments to the ALRB requesting that it allow workers to revoke their cards,” said Philip Martin, professor emeritus at the University of California, Davis, and expert on farm labor.

Controversy around the law has crystallized in the ongoing dispute between UFW and Wonderful Nurseries. Last year, according to workers at the Kern County nursery, UFW organizers held meetings in local homes and churches to educate Wonderful Nurseries employees about the union and collect signatures.

During the meetings, according to the reports, organizers also helped workers apply through an online portal for one-time pandemic-relief payments of $600 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The USDA awarded grants to 14 nonprofit organizations, including the UFW Foundation, to dispense the funds to eligible workers.

In February, UFW submitted cards to the ALRB signed by 327 of Wonderful Nurseries’ 640 employees. Within days, the company contested the union petition, saying UFW had defrauded its workers. The nursery handed over sworn declarations from 148 employees who said they were tricked into signing the cards and wanted to revoke them. In one declaration, a nursery employee described a meeting at a co-worker’s house organized by UFW Vice President Erika Navarrete. “She had me sign a white card with an eagle and told me to sign a piece of paper. She told me this was part of the process to apply for the $600, but she never explained to me or the others that this was part of the union,” the worker said. “They lied to us.”

Dozens of declarations reviewed by Ag Alert®, with employee names redacted, gave similar accounts. “All of it was ignored by the labor board whose very job it is to ensure an honest process,” Wonderful Nurseries President Rob Yraceburu said in a statement.

The ALRB called the allegations “serious in nature,” but it certified the union, triggering the start of a 90-day window to negotiate a contract. The board said the claims would be examined at an investigatory hearing.

Since then, Wonderful Nurseries employees have walked off the job to attend demonstrations outside the ALRB’s office in Visalia and outside the Marriott hotel, the convention center in Bakersfield, where the hearing has entered its third week. They carried placards and chanted in Spanish, “We don’t want a union.”

Wonderful Nurseries is part of the Wonderful Co. farming empire owned by billionaire philanthropists Lynda and Stewart Resnick. The family has donated more than half a billion dollars for programs and infrastructure in the Central Valley and has built schools that serve some of their employees’ children.

“Our company’s history of working with agricultural workers is rooted in mutual trust, collaboration and respect,” Yraceburu said. “We will use every legal and regulatory option at our disposal to do what the UFW and labor board seem only to purport to do, which is to protect workers.”

Wisdom, advice, and insights from the people that make up the fabric of our community.

OurTwoCentsPodcast.com
Legislators Advance Agricultural Bills

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

Legislators in California introduced 2,124 bills in Feb. — 1,505 in the Assembly and 619 in the Senate — which are being considered by their respective houses until May 24. While the main points of focus this year seem to center around artificial intelligence and public safety, several pieces of agricultural legislation from pesticide regulations to amending the Williamson Act are circulating.

AB 2528 – WILLIAMSON ACT

The Williamson Act has been a crucial contract in protecting half of California’s farmland by preventing its development. Since its inception in the 1980s, the Williamson Act holds roughly 16 million acres under the contract, preventing agricultural land from premature or unnecessary urban development.

By allowing local governments to enter into contracts with landowners, farmland is able to remain farmland without interference from developers until the contract’s expiration after nine years.

Assembly Bill 2528, introduced by Democratic Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula would allow landowners within the Williamson Act to cancel their contracts for areas of land that lack sufficient water without waiting nine years or incurring a fee if the land is used for wind or solar energy projects.

The bill has been contentious among different agricultural groups with some such as the California Farm Bureau opposing it for the risk of permanently losing open spaces and agricultural lands.

Other groups such as the Western Growers Association and the Almond Alliance spoke in support of the bill, citing that the contract cancellation offers landowners alternative economic opportunities for lands that would likely sit fallowed for 10 years until the contract is up.

AB 2528 was passed by the Assembly Standing Committee on Agriculture on April 24.

AB 3056 – REFORMING AG OVERTIME

Following a recent study from UC Berkeley’s Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics on the negative effects of AB 1066 on farmworkers, Republican Assemblymember James Gallagher introduced AB 3056 to reverse the “unintended consequences.”

According to the study, AB 1066 — a bill that requires overtime pay for farmworkers who work more than 40 hours a week — unintentionally led to reduced hours for farmworkers and thereby significantly decreased their earnings.

Gallagher’s new bill, AB 3056, proposes an adjustment to the farmworker overtime requirement, mandating overtime pay for employees working more than 50 hours in a workweek instead of 40 hours.

The bill failed to pass in its first hearing in April, but a reconsideration was granted.

AB 1963 – PARAQUAT BAN

Introduced by Democratic Assemblymember Laura Friedman, AB 1963 would prohibit the use, manufacture, sale, delivery, holding, or offering for sale in commerce of any pesticide product containing paraquat.

The California Farm Bureau opposes the bill as it bypasses the scientific review process products must undergo for removal from the marketplace.

AB 828 – WETLANDS EXEMPT FROM SGMA

Democratic Assemblymember Damon Connolly introduced AB 828 — a groundwater pumping exemption — to grant managed wetlands a three-year exemption from the implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. Under AB 828, wetlands and small disadvantaged communities would be able to use their average annual water usage without the “excessive fines” implemented under SGMA.

In contrast, growers that utilize groundwater in the Tulare Lake Subbasin will be charged $300 annually per well and $20 per acre-foot of water.

The bill passed the Assembly and is moving toward a hearing with the State Senate.

Bolthouse Farms Splits Into Two Companies

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

On May 6, Butterfly Equity — a private, Beverly Hills-based firm specializing in the food sector — announced the separation of Bolthouse Farms into two separate companies. Bolthouse Fresh Foods will continue to specialize in fresh carrot production and Generous Brands will include its fresh beverage and salad dressing businesses.

The separation comes roughly four years after Butterfly acquired Bolthouse Farms from the Campbell Soup Company in June 2019. Since then, the equity firm has driven top line growth of more than 30%.

In a press release, Adam Waglay, co-founder, and co-chief executive officer of Butterfly, explained that the move is meant to accelerate the growth of both businesses.

“This separation was always part of our investment thesis, and we have recruited best-in-class leadership teams that are strategically aligned to each business so that Bolthouse Fresh Foods can focus on delivering high quality, fresh produce with excellent service and Generous Brands can become a strong, consumer-centric business with superior fresh beverage brands,” Waglay said.

According to Butterfly, the restructuring was facilitated to separate the debt recapitalization of each business thereby enabling Bolthouse Fresh Food and Generous Brands to increase their portfolios.

Debt recapitalizations are often a way for companies to avoid bankruptcy, reduce financial burdens, or avoid a hostile takeover according to the Corporate Finance Institute. Recapitalization is utilized to stabilize a company’s structure by exchanging one form of financing for another — debt for equity or equity for debt.

For Butterfly, splitting Bolthouse into two separate entities allows for greater investment capabilities and future acquisitions, the press release explained.

Operating partner Jeff Dunn — and former CEO of Bolthouse Farms — will serve as the executive chairman of both companies. Timothy Escamilla, former president of Dole Fresh Vegetables, will serve as CEO of Bolthouse Fresh Foods, while Steve Cornell, former president of fresh beverages and desserts at Kraft Heinz Co., will be CEO of Generous Brands.
CCGGA Annual Meeting Unpacks Regulatory Challenges for Cotton Industry

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

The California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association hosted its annual meeting on May 14 at the International Agri-Center in Tulare, providing insights into CCGGA’s activities this year as well as regulatory updates on water, pesticides, and zero-emissions vehicles.

According to Chris McGlothlin, director of technical services for CCGGA, the State Water Board is proposing a fee increase for the Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program by 5.9% on a per acre charge.

“I guess there’s three certainties in California: death, taxes, and State Water Board increases,” McGlothlin said.

SWB also petitioned the legislature for $7 million from the general fund to pay for 38 additional staff members.

“And while they’re proposing that the $7 million be paid out of the state legislature’s budget, undoubtedly that fund will then shift over to ratepayers, whether it be processing facilities that utilize stormwater, permit holders, or ILRP stakeholders that pay into the overall program,” McGlothlin explained.

The CCGGA staff — comprised of President and CEO Roger Islom, Assistant Vice President Pricilla Rodriguez, and McGlothlin — have been heavily involved in legislative advocacy and pushing back against new or unfeasible regulations.

In May, several CCGGA staff and leadership traveled to Sacramento to address key areas of concern, including pesticide bans, SWB fees, and new zero-emission vehicle truck and forklift rules.

“We are down in the weeds,” Islom said. “But we’re not just down in the weeds on these issues, we are leaders on these issues.”

ZERO-EMISSIONS VEHICLES

The CCGGA conference addressed California’s next ambitious goal — 80% Electrical Vehicles by 2035. California Air Resources Board’s Zero-Emission Forklift Regulation was proposed to help meet the state’s goal by eliminating the use of Class 4 and 5 internal combustion forklifts and concert fleets to ZEV beginning in 2026.

In a legislative update, George Soares of the law firm Kahn, Soares & Conway, explained that the state’s goal to transition to ZEV is aspirational, but there has been little logistical work to reach compliance by 2035.

According to Rodriguez, the CCGGA successfully advocated for an extended compliance period for agriculture operations from 2026 to 2029. She explained that due to discussions with CCGGA, CARB recognized the statewide infrastructure problem in converting over to electric vehicles as well as the sizeable costs it entails.

CCGGA and others oppose the regulation plan to continue advocating for the interests of farmers and ranchers.

“We’re going to be unrelenting on this because if we’re not, we’ve got another SGMA, we’ve got another overtime pay rule, we’ve got another mess on our hands,” Soares said.

PESTICIDES

Several pesticides utilized by cotton growers are facing a potential ban or stricter regulations, Islom explained. One bill — AB 1963 — is proposing the ban of any pesticide product containing paraquat.

According to Islom, the California Department of Pesticide Regulation previously approved the use of paraquat, and political moves to remove the resource from farmers are not based on science.

“There’s nothing else out there that works even close to the way the paraquat does, and we are doing everything we can to fight it,” Islom said.
**Budget Cuts $500 Million**

*Continued from PAGE 1*  
“We are grateful that state funding awarded to Sites Reservoir under Proposition 1 remains in place,” Douglass said.  
“We urge the administration to restore the $500 million as soon as possible to ensure minimal delays on this generational investment in water resilience.”

The Sites Reservoir project aims to collect water during wet seasons to use during dry periods and is projected to store up to 1.5 million acre-feet of water, benefitting 500,000 acres of farmland in the Central Valley.

Despite approving $7.545 billion in funding for Prop 1 initiatives in 2014 — $2.7 billion allocated to water storage projects — the process of building up water infrastructure and storage capabilities has been slow-moving.

Among various factors, the Sites Reservoir project has been delayed by environmental challenges and sticky red tape. According to its website, construction is scheduled to begin in 2026 rather than the initial goal of 2024, and the reservoir is expected to be operational by the end of 2032.

According to a November press release from Governor Newsom’s office, Sites Reservoir is eligible for $875.4 million of Prop. 1 funding, and the total project cost is estimated at $4 billion.

Despite the one-time $500 million reduction for water storage facilities in the 2023-26 fiscal year, the May Revise notes that “significant funding” from Prop 1’s $2.7 billion investment in water storage will remain available.

**NO NEW TAXES?**

Notably, the May Revise avoided creating new taxes and plans to reduce reliance on “Rainy Day” reserves this year. However, according to the CFBF, farmers and ranchers are facing a proposed increase in the mill tax levied on pesticides to address the budget deficit within the California Department of Pesticide Regulation.

In a press release, CFBF President Shannon Douglass explained that the proposal to raise the mill tax from 21 mills to 28.6 mills over three years and increases in registration and licensing fees would amount to a $33 million tax increase. A mill is equal to one-tenth of a cent.

“We agree with Gov. Newsom that there should be no new tax increases,” Douglass said. “That is why we oppose any move by the Department of Pesticide Regulation to increase the mill tax. This tax increase directly impacts farmers and ranchers who purchase crop protection materials. Raising the mill tax would also increase costs of producing food for Californians and burden families with still higher food prices at the grocery store.”

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**2014 WATER BOND FUNDING**

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*Graphic by Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment. (Source: 2014 California Assembly Bill 1471 Water Bond)*
California Moves Closer to Banning Paraquat

By Natalie Willis, Reporter, Valley Ag Voice

In continuity with efforts to reduce pesticide usage in California, the Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials approved Assembly Bill 1963—a bill prohibiting the use, manufacture, sale, delivery, holding, or offering for sale in commerce of any pesticide product containing paraquat.

Authored by Democratic Assemblymember Laura Friedman, AB 1963—if approved by the legislature and signed by Governor Gavin Newsom—would ban the use of paraquat on California fields and orchards by 2026.

In a press release, Friedman suggested that paraquat is linked to Parkinson’s disease, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, and childhood leukemia based on findings from a hypothesis study.

“The evidence is clear: paraquat poses a serious risk to human health and the environment. With more than 60 countries already banning its use, it’s time for California to follow suit to protect Californians, especially those in poor, rural communities from exposure to this toxic weed killer,” Friedman said.

In a move against the legislation, the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association took to Sacramento to testify against the potential ban, citing the pesticide’s use within California’s cotton crop. Despite the opposition, the bill moved forward on April 23. The association plans to continue advocating against AB 1963 upon its presentation to the Senate, according to a press release.

CCGGA explained that the use of any pesticide is subject to substantial environmental and health-based review at the Federal EPA and California’s Department of Pesticide Regulation—both of which approved the use of paraquat in the state.

Blueprint & Metropolitan Sign Historic MOU

Continued from PAGE 1

projects. In some years, Metropolitan’s diverse water supply portfolio supports storing water when the State Water Project (SWP) allocation exceeds 30%—meaning the agency can potentially have access to hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water that can be stored for later use in a dry year. In 2023, they had no place to put 400,000 acre-feet of SWP water. They are looking to change that.

With Metropolitan’s desire for collaboration and ample water supplies in wetter years, the potential exists to develop programs to provide needed water and infrastructure for Valley water districts. In return, Metropolitan would exchange wet year water for reliable supplies during dry years, thereby helping to improve their water supply reliability.

The basis of the MOU is a framework for Metropolitan and the Blueprint to work together to potentially identify and evaluate suitable areas for water banking and additional conveyance facilities if needed. If any potential projects appear feasible, Metropolitan and the Blueprint could pursue discussions with San Joaquin Valley water districts to gauge interest in pursuing a project.

Terms for potential projects, such as size, duration, potential minimum and maximum storage, and recovery amounts, would be negotiated between interested parties and Metropolitan.

In his comments at the MOU signing ceremony, Adel Hagekhalil, General Manager of Metropolitan, said, “...that through these programs Metropolitan seeks to connect the drops, the dots and the hearts...”—meaning interconnecting water supplies, building conveyance and uniting people behind a common vision. The hope is that the MOU is a significant and historic step forward in bringing needed water resources to the valley and water supply reliability to southern California.

Grimmway Farms Acquires San Miguel Produce

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

Grimmway Farms, a leading global fresh produce company based in Bakersfield, announced its acquisition of Oxnard-based San Miguel Produce, Inc. in April. According to a press release, this acquisition signifies Grimmway’s strategic expansion efforts and its commitment to providing innovative product offerings to its customers.

Integrating San Miguel Produce’s fresh-cut operation expertise and resources into Grimmway’s portfolio aims to enhance product offerings and better serve the evolving needs of retailers and food service providers. Jeff Huckaby, Present and CEO of Grimmway, explained that the acquisition opens numerous opportunities for the multi-million-dollar company.

“This acquisition gives us the ability to leverage our combined strengths to seize new opportunities in the fresh-cut vegetable market, drive innovation, and further our mission to bring fresh, healthy, and safe produce to communities around the world,” Huckaby said in a press release. “We are well positioned to build on our many successes of 2023 and meet the ever-growing consumer demand in the industry.”

Additionally, it will support Grimmway’s efforts to reduce food loss and waste by providing post-harvest options not previously available. According to the release, Grimmway plans to offer employment to the existing team at San Miguel and will continue to offer its portfolio of products at the Oxnard facility.
Central Valley FFA Graduates: Future Leaders in Agriculture

By Valley Ag Voice Staff

As the school year comes to a close, graduating high school seniors who dedicated years to the Future Farmers of America program shared their favorite memories as well as a glimpse into their future.

These young individuals excelled academically and made significant contributions to the agricultural community through their involvement in FFA. The program has equipped them with invaluable leadership, teamwork, and Ag science skills, preparing them to be future stewards of the land and advocates for the Central Valley — or wherever life takes them!

From raising livestock and managing crop projects to participating in state and national competitions, these students demonstrated unwavering commitment and passion. Their hard work and dedication are honored as they embark on new adventures, armed with the knowledge and experience gained through their FFA involvement. Each graduate reflects both personal achievements and the bright future of agriculture in the Central Valley.

Congratulations to the graduating class of 2024!

Noelle McCrary will attend Montana State University this fall for a major in Animal Science. Noelle is looking forward to new adventures and memories at MSU. Her favorite FFA memory was when the Garces van knocked down the signs in a farmer’s market parking lot during a field trip.

Kennedy Olney will attend San Diego State University this fall with a major in Communications. She is excited to make new friends and ‘rush’ a sorority. Her favorite FFA memory was speed-walking around the Kern County Fair with Mrs. Rossi.

Gigi Antongiovanni will attend the University of Notre Dame this fall with a major in Pre-health. She is excited to meet new people and attend Notre Dame football games. Her favorite FFA memory was when her team won at Opening and Closing.

Adrian Guerra will attend Cal Poly SLO this fall for a major in Plant Science. He is excited to express himself in new ways and experience a new environment. His favorite FFA memory includes every group meeting this year, especially Friendsgiving.

Melanie Haught will attend Boise State University this fall and major in Business Administration. She is looking forward to meeting new people and attending college football games. Her favorite FFA memory was winning the Opening and Closing Sweepstakes.

Ava Etcheverry will attend Fresno State University this fall to major in Speech and Language Pathology. She is excited to make new memories and meet new people. Her favorite FFA memory was going to the original farmers market in L.A. for the Ag Sales and Marketing course.

Marie Zaninovich will attend the University of California, Davis, this fall for a major in Food Science. Marie is excited to make new friends at Davis. Her favorite FFA memory was attending fun chapter meetings, especially the water ones.

Laurel Magar will attend Montana State University this fall for a major in Agriculture Education. Laurel is excited to meet new people in a new environment. Her favorite FFA memory was the Chapter Officer Leadership Conference in Lone Pine.

Angelina Valpredo will attend the University of Kentucky this fall to major in Animal Science. She is excited to meet new people and experience new things. Her favorite FFA memory was showing at the Kern County Fair.

Ivy Lince will attend Southern Methodist University this fall for a major in Business. Ivy is excited to meet new people and make new memories. Her favorite FFA memory was the October Meeting at Murray Family Farms.

Miguel Montano will attend Bakersfield College this fall to major in agricultural mechanics. He is excited to participate in wrestling and compete at the next level. His favorite FFA memory was during FFA Week, when the BBQ committee hosted a barbecue for the entire school.
Cabbage Growers Wage War on Diamondback Moth

By Rob McCarthy, Reporter, Ventura County

Cabbage acreage in Ventura County dropped from 3,194 in 2020 to 2,642 acres in 2021, and the crop value fell from $37 million to $35 million. While cabbage plantings dropped further to 2,851 in 2021, and the crop value fell from $37 million to $35 million. While cabbage was growing in Ventura County, making it California's hottest spot to study and collect data.

It can be cabbage or Brussels sprouts. A field of broccoli or a Chinese vegetable such as bok choy are welcome hosts. Yellow mustard, a weed that grows along roadways and near the Santa Monica Mountains in Ventura County, offers enough refuge and nutrition for diamondback moths to reproduce and restart the life cycle.
Steelhead Protections Could Bring New Water Restrictions

By Christine Souza
Assistant Editor
Ag Alert

The California Fish and Game Commission is expected to adopt a recommendation to list the Southern California steelhead, shown here in Santa Barbara County, as an endangered species. (Photo/NOAA Fisheries)

A state determination that Southern California steelhead trout merit additional protections could mean tighter water restrictions, according to agricultural groups and water districts.

California Farm Bureau environmental policy analyst Justin Fredrickson said strengthening protections for the Southern California steelhead under the California Endangered Species Act “is going to ratchet things up regulatorily for affected water users.”

Though actions to protect steelhead will vary for different affected watersheds, Fredrickson said, “the state endangered listing will be used to maximize flows in the rivers and minimize or restrict diversions and groundwater pumping.”

The California Fish and Game Commission April 18 unanimously agreed with a staff recommendation that listing the Southern California steelhead as endangered under the state ESA is warranted.

Increased protections for the species would affect water users and districts in San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego counties. The Southern California steelhead has been listed as federally endangered since 1997.

The status review of the species by CDFW cited dwindling numbers of steelhead due to urbanization, agriculture and water development. The department said climate change will lead to “more frequent periods of adverse conditions.”

Groups representing agriculture and water interests in Ventura County argued that there is not enough scientific evidence to warrant the endangered listing. “We’re in a position where we are already doing environmental flows for the steelhead in an area where there isn’t a lot of convincing evidence that there were historic populations here,” said Maureen McGuire, CEO of the Farm Bureau of Ventura County.

“Kyle our not being able to do environmental flows,” McGuire said.

Kevin Merrill, a winegrape grower and chair of the Santa Barbara County Farm Bureau water committee, said local farmers are waiting to see how an endangered listing for Southern California steelhead will affect water users that depend on the Santa Ynez and Santa Maria rivers.

According to California Trout, the upgraded listing of the Southern California steelhead will promote removal of obsolete dams, improve habitat, secure instream flows and restore watersheds, plus enhance federal protection for the species.

The nonprofit group advocates for removal of Matilija Dam in the Ventura River watershed and Rinige Dam along Malibu Creek, and expedited removal of barriers on additional creeks so fish can gain passage.

The state’s decision to increase protections for the Southern California steelhead comes several months after Gov. Gavin Newsom released the California Salmon Strategy aimed at protecting and restoring the species “amidst hotter and drier weather exacerbated by climate change.”

The multiyear approach calls for removing obsolete dams, increasing flows, restoring habitat, improving passes for migration, modernizing hatcheries and other actions.

At the federal level, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service finalized three rules intended to strengthen ESA implementation by restoring protections for species and habitat, strengthening processes for listing species, designating critical habitat, consulting with other federal agencies and ensuring a science-based approach.

To learn more about federal ESA changes that took effect on May 6, visit www.fws.gov/project/endangered-species-act-regulation-revisions.

The California Fish and Game Commission is expected to adopt a recommendation to list the Southern California steelhead, shown here in Santa Barbara County, as an endangered species. (Photo/NOAA Fisheries)
Tech Lags Behind as Clean Trucking Mandates Begin

California ag operations are struggling to convert trucking fleets to meet new state mandates for increasing the number of zero-emission big-rigs on the road. (Photo: Caleb Hampton)

By Caleb Hampton, Assistant Editor, Ag Alert

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California farm owners are scrambling to comply with new rules designed to limit emissions from diesel-powered big rigs and other heavy-duty vehicles. These trucks and buses, while a small fraction of the state’s vehicles, emit more than half the vehicle-related pollution in California, according to regulators. As new standards go into effect, operators report the technology and infrastructure they need for compliance is not yet available—and could still be years away.

“We are not opposed to electrification,” said Steven Fenaroli, director of political affairs for the California Farm Bureau. “The reality is that the technology just isn’t there yet to meet the requirements.”

The Mahrt family, which owns the Petaluma Egg Farm, has been stumped by a rule announced in 2022 that gave trucking firms until Jan. 1 of this year to convert at least 15% of refrigerated box truck fleets to zero-emission vehicles.

The Sonoma County chicken farmers own 10 diesel-powered “reefer trucks” that they use to haul organic eggs from their farm to restaurants and grocery stores around the Bay Area. The new rule means they need to replace the trucks with zero-emission vehicles or install battery-powered refrigerating units.

“The problem is they do not exist,” said Jordan Mahrt, manager at Petaluma Egg Farm, referring to battery-powered units that are compatible with the family’s diesel-powered trucks. He said that would be the most affordable solution, and there are industry talks of developing such a unit. But he added, “No one has even seen a prototype yet.”

The other option is to purchase brand new zero-emission refrigerated trucks. The first models hit the market earlier this year. The Mahrts ordered one. But the manufacturer has not told them how long it will take to build and deliver their truck. “I don’t know when it’s going to be made,” Mahrt said.

The family had no choice but to seek an exemption from the rule. To do so, it needed to submit its truck purchase order, proof that it incurred with a utility provider about installing charging units, and other documents. “It’s a complicated process,” Mahrt said.

Trucking firms also reported obstacles to integrating zero-emission drayage trucks into their fleets. Under California’s Advanced Clean Fleets rule, which was adopted last year by the California Air Resources Board, beginning this year, any new drayage truck registered in the state must be a zero-emission vehicle. The rule requires the phaseout of all diesel-powered drayage trucks in California by 2035 and nearly all diesel trucks in the state by 2042. In December, the Air Resources Board announced it would delay enforcement this year pending permission from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Drayage trucks haul agricultural products and other cargo in shipping containers between ports and processing or packing facilities. CARB put them first in line for conversion to zero-emission vehicles because it said their emissions especially impact underserved communities adjacent to ports and industrial zones, and because their shorter routes are more likely to fall within the limited range of the battery-powered heavy-duty vehicles already on the market.

But operators, especially those serving rural agricultural regions, say technological limitations and market forces make using zero-emission drayage trucks a nonstarter.

Joe Antonini, owner of Antonini Freight Express, has a fleet of more than 60 drayage trucks that haul bulk wine, tomato paste, and other products between the Central Valley and the Port of Oakland.

The wineries and canneries always max out the 80,000-pound limit trucks in the U.S. can haul. Zero-emission truck batteries weigh up to 16,000 pounds, displacing up to a third of the truck’s carrying capacity. To haul the same wine, Antonini would need more trucks, drivers, and hours. To stay in business, he would have to pass the extra cost on to the winery. “I wouldn’t be able to,” he said, because the winery would just hire someone else to haul their wine.

Zero-emission drayage trucks also lack the range to cover many of the routes the company runs. The average daily distance a drayage truck travels is 95 miles, within the 100-150 mile range of commercially available battery-powered trucks. But Antonini’s trucks often travel routes of more than 400 miles in a day.

“Our trucks don’t finish their trip right outside the port,” said Stefano Antonini, Modesto terminal supervisor for the company. “They come all the way back to the valley,” sometimes going from Stockton to Madera to Oakland to Lodi and back to Stockton in a day.

Last year, fleet owners were impacted by the final phase of a different rule, which prohibited heavy-duty vehicles made before 2010 from operating in California after Jan. 1, 2023. The rule especially affected small trucking businesses and farmers that lacked the capital to invest in new trucks and were using older trucks on a seasonal or part-time basis.

Keith Nilmeyer, who farms 220 acres of oranges, peaches, apricots and grapes in Fresno County and runs a trucking business, said the rule slashed his fleet from 18 trucks to eight trucks during the past year.

“We were trying to stay compliant, but it just kept going, and there was no relief,” Nilmeyer said. “It takes a big bite out of everything.”

Nilmeyer and other operators said they remain reluctant to invest in zero-emission trucks, which cost around $450,000, citing the high cost and deficiencies in the vehicles’ range and carrying capacity.

California is spending billions on subsidies to make zero-emission trucks more affordable, but fleet owners said the cost to them is still double that of buying a diesel truck.

They also voiced concerns that California lacks the charging infrastructure to support electric truck fleets, and the state’s utility providers lack the grid capacity to support the infrastructure.

“Those are all deal killers,” Joe Antonini said.
Farm Bureau Advocates for Passage of 2024 Farm Bill

By Christine Souza
Assistant Editor
Ag Alert

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Leaders of the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate agriculture committees released title-by-title frameworks of the 2024 Farm Bill, omnibus legislation to support the nation’s farmers and ranchers through a variety of safety-net, farm-loan, conservation, and disaster-assistance programs.

The 2018 Farm Bill, originally set to expire in 2023 but extended last year, comes up for renewal in September. The latest farm bill outlines were released May 1.

The California Farm Bureau board of directors, members of this year’s Leadership Farm Bureau class and the organization’s federal policy team were in Washington, D.C., early this month, meeting with lawmakers and staff to advocate on issues, including the farm bill.

Noting that farmers face a challenging economy, with low commodity prices, high inflation and rising input costs, California Farm Bureau First Vice President Shaun Crook said passing a 2024 Farm Bill this year is critical.

“It is important to increase baseline funding for all programs because we in agriculture are in a drastically different economic environment in 2024 than we were in 2016 when the last farm bill was negotiated,” said Crook, a Tuolumne County forester and logger.

Rep. Glenn “GT” Thompson, R-Pa., chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, released the committee’s outline for the legislation, which guides U.S. farm and nutrition policies. The document includes investments in the farm safety net, conservation, research, and forestry.

“Each title of this farm bill reflects a commitment to the American farmer and viable pathways to funding those commitments and is equally responsive to the policies of the 118th Congress,” Thompson said in a statement.

The House Committee on Agriculture is expected to release final language this week and consider amendments during a bill markup set for May 23.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., chair of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee, released the committee framework, the Rural Prosperity and Food Security Act. It includes investments in the farm safety net, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, climate-smart conservation practices and addresses foreign ownership of farmland.

“This is a serious proposal that reflects bipartisan priorities to keep farmers farming, families fed and rural communities strong,” Stabenow said in a statement. “The foundation of every successful farm bill is built on holding together the broad, bipartisan coalition of farmers, rural communities, nutrition and hunger advocates, researchers, conservationists and the climate community.”

In California Farm Bureau discussions with lawmakers in the nation’s capital, “members of our delegation reminded them that waiting another year to pass a farm bill is very much to our detriment,” said Matthew Viohl, Farm Bureau’s director of federal policy.

“It may be easy to kick the can down the road with short-term extensions, but the consequences are real for farmers in California and across the country,” Viohl added.

Discussions with lawmakers, he said, reflected a general uncertainty about what could be accomplished during a presidential election year. “Each office has its own different outlook on what they think might happen. Some are very hopeful and some not hopeful at all,” Viohl said.

However, despite the uncertain political landscape, Viohl said, “it was a very productive advocacy trip,” adding that lawmakers appreciate hearing from farmers who provide a “boots-on-the-ground perspective” on federal policies.

Sutter County rice grower Sy Honig of Robbins, a member of the Leadership Farm Bureau class, said the delegation emphasized that federal crop insurance needs to be expanded in the farm bill to include more specialty crops.

“We grow more than 400 varieties of crops in California, and only a fraction of those are covered,” Honig said. “Expansion of crop insurance for crops that are not typically covered could help (for example) those farming small grains and specialty rice.”

Honig said politicians from both parties were receptive to suggestions brought by California farmers and acknowledged that they are trying to pass the farm bill this year. “They’re trying to work through their differences,” Honig said.

Each framework, Viohl said, contains improvements for farmers and ranchers with expansion of crop insurance protections, particularly for specialty crop producers, an expansion of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and more money for trade and market access programs.

Other priorities for California farmers, he said, include expanded risk-management tools and programs, a fix for adjusted gross income limits, an updated definition of rural, support for the...
Connected by the Church Body

By Joshua Stevens
Faith Contributor, Valley Ag Voice

Imagine yourself in the church of Ephesus caught up in all manners of debate regarding fundamental issues to the faith. Did Christ literally come to earth? Is He of the exact nature as the Father? Must we continue to keep the law? Imagine as brothers and sisters of the faith are swept up in clever language and abandoning the gift of the gospel. Imagine local leaders being dismissed as these debates flare up or even being outdated in public forums, unable to defend their faith in Christ. The Church needed an outside hand, such as an apostle, to step in and steady the reigns to keep the church on the orthodox trajectory.

From a modern perspective, it can be surprising how we defend the faith of the church. Often, these letters would come years after the writer had last seen the congregation. In a time when communication was substantially more difficult and dangerous than it is today, people from around the Roman Empire kept in contact with one another while maintaining familiarity, love, and hope for their brothers and sisters in Christ. The scriptures repeat this point time and again: how to greet a fellow believer, to keep one another in prayers, to rejoice for them, and while many churches do this well in their own congregation, they fail to do it for neighboring congregations. It would seem the clear example from scripture is we should not be isolated in our churches but should yearn to grow closer with all who believe in Christ so we can strengthen one another, encourage one another, and together run the race of faith for which we have each individually and collectively been tasked with running.

As we approach election season, there will be an ever stronger cry by many people to do this or that in the name of Christ or Christianity. It should be our prayer that we are not swayed by the clever words of people seeking personal gain but united in the gospel each of us believes. United in the great commission as we seek to disciple the world as we ourselves have been discipled.

WILL YOU PRAY WITH ME?

Dear Lord, thank you for the opportunity we have to come together on such a regular basis to praise you, to give thanks to you, and to learn from you. As these next few months march on, we ask that you would grant us a heart that yearns for the reconciliation of the lost, the return of the prodigal children, and our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who we may strongly disagree with. Remind us of the power of connection outside our local congregation so that we may encourage and be encouraged by others serving you. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

SAVE-THE-DATE
FOR THESE AGRICULTURE EVENTS

Growers interested in learning more about the potato and mushroom industries are in for a treat this June.

MUSHROOMS IN MONTEREY

The Mushroom Summit at the Monterey Conference Center will occur on June 5-6. Industry veterans, entrepreneurs, scientists, and retailers are invited to attend. The summit will showcase new research, expert insights, and hands-on activities in the mushroom industry.

Attendees can also join in on a guided tour of Monterey Mushrooms — one of the largest mushroom farms.

TATER TEST

The 2024 Kern County Potato Field Variety Day will take place on June 12 from 10-12:30 p.m. at Hart Memorial Park. The annual event hosted by the UC Cooperative Extension is a great opportunity for growers to see tubers of new, potential varieties.

Information on variety performance as compared to standard varieties will be shared. Potato entries include varieties from several USDA, state, and private breeding programs. This year, attendees will see various russets, chippers, reds, yellows, and specialty potato types.

Attendees will have an opportunity to express their evaluations and recommendations about new varieties to university researchers, breeders, seed growers, and fellow growers.

BIOLOGICAL SUMMIT

Mark your calendars for June 25-26 to attend the 2024 Salinas Biological Summit. This year’s summit will focus mainly on the challenges facing specialty crop growers and key topics include the regulatory environment, technology, consumer trends, retail, and the global macro-economic environment.

Local and international experts will provide insight into these key topics. Guy Kawasaki, former Chief Evangelist at Apple, venture capitalist, and best-selling author will serve as the keynote speaker.
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