

## Starting Strong and Growing Fast: Inside the Farm Bureau Foundation's Next Chapter

By Vicky Boyd, SCFB

On the eve of its second fundraiser, the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau Foundation has already met many of the goals board members initially set. But they're not about to sit still and have mapped out a number of new programs, some of which are already in the works.

Others will begin as soon as this summer, said Stanislaus County Farm Bureau Director of Education and Communication Anna Genasci. Among them are expanding the Ag EdVenture educational program for third-graders, starting a summer youth

ag literacy program at county libraries and possibly hosting a booth at Oakdale's Morning Market.

### GENERATING EXCITEMENT

Foundation Board Member Deanna van Klaveren said she's been excited about the Foundation's progress so far.

"I think with the support of Farm Bureau staff, we've accomplished a ton in very short order. And I think that's because there were so many things that needed a place to live and the Foundation really provided it," said van Klaveren, who co-owns Generation Growers wholesale nursery with husband Roger.

She was referring to the Farm Bureau already being involved in a number of activities, such as grower education and Ag EdVenture. But the Foundation opened up additional opportunities to expand those programs as well as start new ones.

Van Klaveren also credited the thoughtful approach the Foundation and board took to develop its vision and mission statement for their success.

"I think the best decision the board made was to start by bringing somebody in to guide us through a process to set up the Foundation well," she said. "We had three or four full days of meetings, but I think it meant everything. We really wanted to be

thoughtful about what this Foundation can do and what does this mean."

Foundation Board Member Wayne Zipser said he was equally excited about the Foundation's progress and appreciated the measured approach taken to develop it.

"I think it was done right," Zipser said. "I like the way they put it together and didn't jump in. We listened to a lot of potential donors that gave us feedback."

As a member of another foundation that collects an administrative fee, Zipser said he wanted to be able to assure possible donors that 100% of their contribution to the Farm Bureau's Foundation would go toward the intended uses.

### LONG TIME IN COMING

Discussions about starting a non-profit foundation date back about 20 years, said Zipser, who was the previous Stanislaus County Farm Bureau executive director before retiring. But something always came up, and the foundation never came to fruition until Genasci and current Executive Director Catie Diemel began working on it in earnest a few years ago.

Approved by the IRS in late 2023, the 501(c)(3) non-profit took more than a year to develop goals and establish a board of directors. Guided by three overarching principals — educating youth, growers and consumers — the Foundation held its first fundraiser in March 2025 in Oakdale.

With stronger promotion and a new, more centralized location at the Durrer Barn in Modesto, Genasci said she expected this year's fundraiser on March 26 to be even better attended.

### MAKING PROGRESS

One of the Foundation's first projects was partnering with Macerich, Vintage Faire Mall's parent company, and the Modesto Irrigation District on a set of murals high-

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lighting the county's top 10 crops and the people and resources behind them. The display was visible for about six months near the mall's entrance during the busy 2025 holiday shopping season. The good news, Genasci said, is the Foundation has been given permission to use the artwork from the panels. She envisioned repurposing them as pop-ups that can be displayed during ag days or at other public events.

In addition, the Foundation has increased the number of youth scholarships it awards, thanks to a generous supporter.

"We received a donation from a retired grower, and that has helped grow that program," Genasci said. "He'll be part of the selection committee and will be there when it's awarded."

The financial award also will bear his name.

## STARTING 'EM YOUNG

Abi Fair, SCFB membership and grower relations coordinator, has reached out to all of Stanislaus County's public schools about participating in Ag EdVenture. The nearly day-long event allows third-graders to learn about and experience agriculture first hand. In the past, the program involved about 1,300 students within the Turlock City School District. "Right now, based on current sign-up, we will double this in the fall," Fair said.

Eventually, the Foundation hopes to include all of the county's 7,700 public school third-graders.

This summer, the Foundation plans to launch a youth agricultural literacy program at the county's 13 library branches. Two retired ag teachers are developing the curriculum, and a Modesto Junior College summer intern will help manage the program. MID has agreed to sponsor the educational effort, which is similar to Ag in

the Classroom.

The literacy program has two goals, Genasci said. One is to educate youth through hands-on activities, while the other is to create some ag awareness among the adults who brought them.

With only a handful of employees, the Farm Bureau is already stretched thin, Genasci said. To help staff the additional events, she put out a call for volunteers. About 30 to 40 people replied. "With a small staff, this will be really helpful so we can cover more ground," Genasci said.

## GROWER EDUCATION

The Foundation also continues to build on grower educational programming, Genasci said.

"We offer trainings almost every other month on topics from pesticide handling safety to legacy planning," she said. Most are held online, while a few, such as Spray Safe, are conducted in person. As part of a partnership with Stanislaus County Workforce Development, the Foundation has received grants to help offset the cost of various training efforts. The most recent was the English Language Learner at Work Program, which focused on ag-related vocabulary that farm workers may encounter.

In another collaboration, the Foundation plans to team with MJC to bring the Noble Research Institute's three-day in-person Noble Orchard Essentials regenerative educational program to Stanislaus County. It is planned for May 12-14.

"The Foundation is making a donation to help cover the cost of that program and in return, the cost for Farm Bureau members



will be reduced,” Genasci said.

The science-backed program “equips participants with practical tools and regenerative knowledge to enhance soil vitality, strengthen tree and vine health, and boost both yield quality and whole-system profitability,” according to the Noble Institute website. The Ardmore, Oklahoma-based non-profit hosted a similar one for pecan growers recently at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas.

## CONSUMER OUTREACH

To connect with consumers, the Foundation has applied for a booth at the Oakdale Morning Market, held Saturdays from May through September on Third Avenue. Each week, the market features a local nonprofit organization that serves community residents.

The Stanislaus County Farm Bureau Foundation recently volunteered to host an Agriculture In The Classroom regional mini-conference in September. Rather than conduct a statewide teacher conference annually, California Ag In The Classroom has decided to hold the big event every other year. In the off years, a county will host a regional mini-conference.

The state Ag In The Classroom program will conduct the in-class learning sessions. The Stanislaus County Farm Bureau Foundation will be responsible for the venue and scheduling farm tours, which includes finding growers willing to speak to teacher participants.

Thinking outside of the proverbial box, the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau Foundation is making a point to get involved with community activities outside of traditional agricultural venues.

Genasci herself is a recent graduate of Leadership Modesto, an immersive 10-month-long leadership development program run by the Modesto Chamber of Commerce. Now she, along with Anthony Ratto, Ratto Brothers operations manager, serve as ag day chairs.

“The participants are not necessarily families with ag, so it’s an opportunity to network with other folks in our county to shed light on what we do and the importance of ag in this county’s economy,” she said.

Learn more about the Foundation here: <https://stanfarmbureau.org/farm-bureau-foundation/>

