

The Stanislaus Farm News

STANISLAUS COUNTY



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**Official Publication of Stanislaus County Farm Bureau
Vol.77 No.7 April 24, 2026**

When completed, MJC's squab production facility will be self-funding, much like its egg laying operation pictured here. Poultry interns McLain Blackmon (left) and Emma Reis said they're excited about squab's unique production system. Photo by Vicky Boyd

See full story on page 3

See Farmworker Appreciation Winners on page 10

Published Fridays by the
Stanislaus County Farm Bureau

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Stanislaus Farm News (ISSN: 8750-4960) Copyright © 2025 is published 20 times per year by the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau 1201 L St. Modesto, CA 95454. Call (209) 522-7278 to subscribe.

Application to mail at

Periodicals postage prices is pending at Modesto, CA.

The Stanislaus Farm News will publish on the following dates in 2025: Jan 17, Feb 7, Feb 21, March 7, March 21, April 11, April 25, May 9, May 23, June 20, July 11, July 25, Aug 8, Aug 22, Sept 19, Oct 3, Oct 17, Nov 7, Nov 21, Dec 12

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: 1201 L Street Modesto, CA 95354. Stanislaus County Farm Bureau does not assume responsibility for statements by advertisers or for products advertised in the Stanislaus Farm News. Farm Bureau does not assume responsibility for statements or expressions of opinion other than in editorials or in articles showing authorship by an officer of the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau.

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SCFB MISSION STATEMENT

To serve as the voice of Stanislaus County agriculture at all levels of government, while providing programs to assist its farms and family members and educate the general public of needs and importance to agriculture.

Filet Mignon with Wings: MJC's Squab Facility Inspires Student Interest

By Vicky Boyd, SCFB

When Modesto Junior College Animal Science Professor Tim Truax proposed building a squab-production facility a few years ago, he envisioned what he described as a "pigeon palace." As so often happens, planning and construction have been slowed from the original timeline, and the facility is now scheduled to open in the summer of 2028.

In the meantime, Truax's promotion of a new poultry production system and the thought of having a unique facility have

excited at least some MJC students.

"I think having such a niche market and I think something new and unique is cool," said freshman McLain Blackmon, a poultry intern from Tulare County. "It would be kind of fun to learn something new and to be part of something like that. It would be a great experience."

Sophomore Emma Reis, a poultry intern from Woodland, agreed. "I feel like it's out of the ordinary and it's something interesting to learn," she said. "I had a family friend who did squab."

Both will likely have graduated before the facility's completion, but they said they plan to return to MJC for the ribbon cutting.

restaurants as well as Asian markets in the Bay Area, Southern California and Canada.

For several years, Truax has discussed partnering with the Squab Producers of California. The Modesto-based processing and marketing cooperative — one of the largest suppliers of squab in the world — has agreed to bring MJC on a producer, said Josh Taylor, vice president of sales and business development.

The co-op views the arrangement as an investment in the next generation of potential squab advocates, whether it is becoming an actual squab grower, as an ag teacher who educates students about squab or simply promoting squab.

"Our future resides on why our squab is uncommonly good poultry," Taylor said, referring to the co-op's tag line. "We need that next generation to be aware of the opportunity to become a squab grower and hopefully join our co-op."

As part of fostering the future, he and co-op Chairman Tim Beck recently spoke to Truax's poultry class about squab. Both Beck and co-op President and CEO Dalton Rasmussen are MJC alumni.

"By the end of it, they were all asking us inspiring questions," Taylor said, adding one student even wanted more information about becoming a grower.

THE 'PIGEON PALACE'

Truax envisions a 400-pair facility to be located on the MJC West campus. Much like the college's egg laying operation, the squab facility would be financially self-sufficient with proceeds reinvested in the program.

Students also would run the squab program. But unlike interns who run the egg operation and live on-campus, students involved with squab could live off campus.

LONG-TIME DREAM

Ask any of his students, and they'll tell you that Truax is enamored with squab and having such a facility has been a long-time dream of his.

"I was drawn to the different production system that can be managed differently than conventional layers and broilers," Truax said. "Plus the market is really intriguing."

Nicknamed the "meat of kings," squab is a young pigeon before it can fly. The dark-meat delicacy, sometimes described as filet mignon with wings, is coveted by high-end



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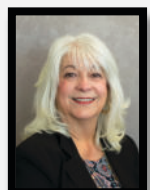
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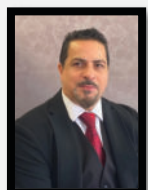
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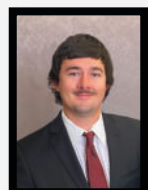
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But that's where most similarities end. Producing squab, which are pigeons harvested about four weeks after hatching, is a slow process. That said, squab require minimal labor because the parents perform much of the chick care.

And don't think of squab as the birds that frequent park statues. Most squab producers raise King Cal pigeons, a breed that has been developed for better fertility, better feed efficiency, higher growth rates and better carcass quality, Truax said.

Male and female pigeons pair up, mate for life, build nests and produce a maximum of two eggs per clutch. As a result, most squab facilities have rows and rows of nest boxes for the pairs, which share parenting duties.

This differs from chickens, which lay up to one egg per day and don't pair up. After about 18 days incubation, squab chicks are born with their eyes closed and totally reliant on parents for food.

Like many birds, adult pigeons regurgitate a nutritious cottage-cheese-like material produced in their crop to feed to their young. Poultry chicks, on the other hand,

are precocial and can almost immediately begin eating chick starter feed.

Squab require about 14-16 hours of light daily, much like chickens, but are fairly heat and cold tolerant, Truax said. After about 28 days after hatching, squab are harvested and processed, yielding about 1 pound of meat per bird.

"Basically if you maintain a pair of pigeons, they should give you a pair of squab to process," Truax said. Multiply that by the 400 pairs he envisions for the MJC facility, and he said it should pay for itself based on current market prices.

COMPLEMENTING OTHER MJC POULTRY PROGRAMS

The MJC squab facility design and construction will be funded through workforce development grants to support educational programs that provide students with the skills and know-how to directly move into the workforce. Truax said MJC has used workforce grants in

the past to bring in sheep and goats and upgrade its reproductive equipment for artificial insemination.

The squab facility also would provide students unique experiences and would follow in the footsteps of other MJC poultry programs. It is the only community college in the western United States with a poultry science associate degree program, Truax said. As far as he knows, MJC also is the only community college with as large an on-site laying facility — 500 hens — and the only one in the state with a state-inspected poultry processing facility.

Want more information about the MJC's Poultry program? Follow them at <https://www.instagram.com/mjcpoultry/>



*Photo courtesy Squab Producers of California
Sometimes referred to as the "meat of kings" or filet mignon with wings, squab is coveted by high-end restaurants as well as Asian markets in the Bay Area, Southern California and Canada.*



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From Ninth Street to the Future: JS West Expands While Honoring Its Roots

By Vicky Boyd, SCFB

When Mike West's great grandfather, James Stewart West, moved to Modesto from Nebraska in 1909, he started a feed mill and a coal delivery business on Ninth Street. The family didn't begin its egg business, JS West Family Farms, until the 1940s and then only with a few thousand laying hens.

As the family has grown during the past 100-plus years, so too has its businesses. A bustling propane enterprise has replaced coal delivery. The egg business has bur-

geoned to about 1.5 million laying hens producing eggs marketed through the Nu-Cal Foods cooperative.

While the original grain mill on Ninth Street closed nearly a decade ago, a partnership in NuWest Milling near Hughson provides feed for the family's chickens as well as outside customers.

And after 23 years, JS West has outgrown its current headquarters on Ninth Street south of the old mill and recently broke ground on a new building near Kiernan and Dale roads. It is expected to be completed in 2027.

Despite the companies' expansion, JS West President and CEO Mike West said they're still essentially following in the founder's footsteps.

"My great grandfather started in the grain business from day one and in the coal business," said West, the fourth-generation family business leader. "If you look around, we're still heating homes and feeding livestock. Now the only difference from day one is we're producing eggs. Each business thrives off the others."

Already, the fifth generation of Wests has joined the company and is learning the ropes. But relatives working with each other aren't limited to the Wests.

Senior Director of Agriculture Operations Michael Silva, for example, followed his father, who will retire shortly from the poultry side. Vice President of Retail Propane Brian Arbini's father worked at JS West and now his son does, too.

"There are a lot of generations involved in this business," West said. "It makes it all a wonderful way to work."

Arbini agreed. "We truly are family in this business. It's the same way we treat our customers. When you're a customer with JS West, we treat you like family."

PROPANE GROWTH

Of the family's business sectors, the one which West is currently most excited about is JS West Propane. Rural homeowners account for about 65% of propane use, while the remaining one-third is used by agriculture to power well pumps, fruit dryers and other related processing.

In addition, propane — which is the lowest carbon of all petroleum-based fuels — helps power industrial uses, said Patti Grantham, vice president wholesale supply. In the past, JS West obtained much of its propane from four Northern California oil refineries since it is a byproduct of crude oil refining and natural gas processing, she said.

The permanent closure of two refineries and another one pulled off line for major maintenance forced the company to look elsewhere for supplies.

"For JS West, we used to get quite a bit of our gas from there," West said. "We got 90% 10 years ago. Now we get 10% from refineries. The rest we bring in on trains." The company's largest liquid gas storage terminal, which West describes as their "crown jewel," is off a rail spur in Kerman west of Fresno. Recently, JS West opened a smaller rail terminal in West Sacramento,



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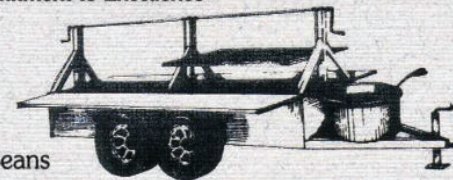
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From 'JS West' on page 5

bringing a total of five terminals on line. With the latest addition, West said they're now able to serve wholesale customers from Fresno to the Oregon-California border.

The terminals complement the company's eight retail outlets from Fresno to Colfax that serve residential and agricultural customers as well as stores that have propane cylinder exchange sites. West also recently brought on board Arbini and Grantham to help with the growth.

The propane business hopes to complete installing remote monitors on all of its customers' tanks by the end of summer, Arbini said. The wireless technology, which reports tank levels, will help improve efficiency.

"It will help us be more efficient on the business side and help us reduce our carbon footprint on the road," he said. At the

same time, the monitors won't preclude will-call customers, who will be serviced as they always have.

'GREAT STRIDES' IN THE EGG BUSINESS

The egg side of the family business, JS West Family Farms, didn't get started for several decades after James Stewart West founded his coal and feed business.

"My great grandfather sold feed to the live stock producers, and he saw some of those producers were making more money than he was and thought he should get into that game," West said. "And I'm sure glad he did."

From a modest start in the 1940s, their egg business slowly grew to 38 contract egg ranches in 1990. Today, the family has zero contract facilities and owns all of their ranches.

"We've made great strides in that business," West said. "It's a completely different business than when it was started."

Over the past 15 years, for example, the company first converted its chicken houses to accommodate larger cages after voters passed Proposition 2 — the

Farm Animal Confinement Initiative — in 2008. Later with the passage of Proposition 12, it remodeled chicken houses to be totally cage-free, Silva said.

All of the family's farms are certified through the voluntary United Egg Producers' Certified Animal Welfare Program, which is based on guidelines for optimal hen wellbeing developed by an independent scientific advisory committee. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service audits the farms and practices to ensure they comply with the guidelines.

JS West's egg operation is split into two locations. Pullets — hens up to about 16 weeks old that haven't started laying — are housed in Stanislaus County facilities, while the laying houses are in Merced County.

An egg processing plant, where eggs are washed, inspected for quality, graded by the USDA and packaged, adjoins the laying barns.

Altogether, JS West Family Farms has about 1.5 million chickens, although the actual number fluctuates slightly, Silva said. As part of their sustainability commitment, they sell manure from the barns for fertilizer and composting.



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Big cats complicate ranchers' livelihoods

Mountain lions in California have faced challenges as their environments are developed. Blocked in by roads and other human-made structures, their ability to roam has been limited. In February, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife listed the species' populations in parts of Southern California and the Central Coast as threatened, broadening protections for mountain lions spanning from the San Francisco Bay Area to the southern border. Ranchers and rural residents say the protections given to the predator leave them with inadequate options to protect their livestock and livelihoods when the lions become a problem. "It's a very frustrating situation for anybody in the rural communities, pet owners and the ranchers," said Vince Fontana, a San Mateo County rancher. "We're the ones that are living and working and basically co-existing with these animals."

California weighs 'truth in labeling' wine industry law

California lawmakers are set to consider new legislation that would close a loophole that for decades has allowed winemakers to label wines as "American" even when they are made partly from imported bulk wine. Under current federal law, wines can be labeled American when at least 75% of the liquid came from U.S.-grown grapes or agricultural products. Assembly Bill 1585 would change that threshold to 100% for wines sold in California. The bill's authors and sponsors said their intent is to promote trust among consumers by improving the accuracy and transparency of wine labels. "We want to make sure that there is truth in advertising when it comes to wine coming from the U.S.," said Assemblymember Rhoades Ransom, D-Tracy, who co-authored the bill. "This is another way of us ensuring that consumers know what they're purchasing."

Dry conditions push farms to new irrigation strategies

With California facing a below-average snowpack and recent warm temperatures triggering early snow melt, farmers anticipate constraints on their irrigation plans, especially those who farm south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Some technologies and methods are emerging to help farmers adapt their irrigation practices. Improvements to modern drip emitters have allowed growers to ration water and deliver it directly to their crops' root zone, and now different kinds of software are being integrated into those systems to squeeze out more savings, said Eric Hadden, executive director of the Water, Energy and Technology Center at California State University, Fresno. "It is about smart management," Hadden said. "The newest advancement in that field is the integration of AI (artificial intelligence) and the ability to analyze the data, look at it and make decisions."

National survey shows most farmers can't afford fertilizer

An overwhelming majority of U.S. farmers who responded to a nationwide survey say they cannot afford to purchase enough fertilizer to get them through the year. The percentage of farmers who prepurchased fertilizer varies significantly by region. Conducted by the American Farm Bureau Federation April 3-11, the survey shows 70% of respondents say fertilizer is so expensive that they will not be able to buy all of what they need. The survey was conducted as the conflict in the Middle East sent fertilizer and fuel prices soaring. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has kept critical fertilizer supplies and crude oil from reaching global markets, putting a squeeze on supplies around the world. "Spring planting decisions depend heavily on access to fertilizer and diesel fuel, both of which have been impacted by geopolitical risks that have disrupted global markets," AFBF economist Faith Parum said in her analysis of the survey results.

California asparagus growers hang on despite acreage decline

Ever-increasing labor costs in California and free trade that led to a surge in cheaper, duty-free asparagus imports from Mexico have pushed the state's asparagus industry to the brink of extinction. But a handful of growers and packers continue to hang on,



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with some even expressing a ray of optimism. “I think we’ve felt better about it the last two years,” said Aaron Barcellos, a partner in the family-owned A-Bar Ag Enterprises near Firebaugh. “Last year and this year, the markets, for whatever reason, haven’t had the (imported) grass, and we’re finding better markets.” California asparagus production topped 37,000 acres in 2000 before it started to decline, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture figures. The state now has probably fewer than 1,000 acres of commercial asparagus, according to industry estimates.

Melissa Hurtado on ag overtime: ‘Everyone can win’

Following research that showed California’s 2016 agricultural overtime law resulted in an overall decline in farmworker earnings, state Sen. Melissa Hurtado, D-Sanger, coauthored Senate

Bill 921, which would create a tax credit to offset the cost to farmers of paying overtime premiums. “Just going around the Senate district at different types of events where there were farmworkers, I’ve had individuals come up to me and tell me that it’s killing them—that they’re getting reduced hours and they want more hours,” Hurtado told Ag Alert® last month in an interview. “It’s something I’ve been very vocal about, which is not a popular thing to do as a Democrat, but it’s a necessary thing to do. We can get it right. This doesn’t have to be a situation where everyone loses. Everyone can win.”



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2026 Farmworker of the Year ~ Paty Lopez

By Vicky Boyd, SCFB

As the longest tenured employee at Duarte Nursery near Hughson, Paty Lopez's influence can be felt throughout the family-owned operation. But her impact extends far beyond that into the community as she managed hundreds of employees and advocated on behalf of agriculture and farmworkers.

Frank Olide, director of nursery operations, said Lopez was already working at the nursery when he arrived in 1992. While they each were supervisors in different departments, they worked in parallel.

"Her leadership and her training skills and her patience allowed her to move up to become the labor manager," Olide said. Lopez also had a unique perspective that she harnessed to become a strong advocate in front of lawmakers and on the steps of the Capitol in Sacramento.

"Paty is a very unique employee," Olide said. "She started as a worker, became a supervisor, became a manager, a high-level manager, and understood the workers' needs, understood the company, the concerns and the issues. And she understood really that some of these laws and some of these issues affect both the individual at home — the worker — and also the bottom line for the company."

For those reasons and more, Olide nominated Lopez for the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau's Farm Worker Appreciation Award.

SIX YEARS AND COUNTING

Now in its sixth year, the Farm Worker Appreciate Awards program was started by the Stanislaus Farm Bureau, the Modesto Rotary Club, AgSafe, the Stanislaus County Agricultural Commissioner's office and the Central Valley Opportunity Center during the COVID pandemic. They saw it as a way

to recognize essential workers vital to producing, harvesting and packing food. The awards continue today to spotlight the people behind the scenes who help feed and clothe not only Stanislaus County residents but also those elsewhere in the U.S. and around the world.

A 'BIG FOOTPRINT'

Jim Duarte founded the nursery that bears his last name in 1989 and shortly thereafter hired Lopez to graft plants. She didn't know how to graft nor did she know English, but she quickly learned both. With an eye for detail, a quest for efficiency and a skill for managing employees, Lopez was promoted to grafting supervisor. Eventually, she was named labor manager to oversee all of the operation's employees, which peaked at 700.

Carolina Gutierrez joined Duarte in 1992 and worked with Lopez, who taught her how to graft plants.

"Paty is a natural born leader," Gutierrez said. "She's very humble and very helpful." Gutierrez said Lopez was always willing to share and guide workers through what needed to be done. She also would see strengths in employees and push them to achieve their goals. It was because of Lopez's recommendation that Gutierrez is now a production scheduler for the company.

Throughout the years, Gutierrez noted Lopez's enthusiasm and energy and said it was "something to look up to and try to emulate."

Alejandra Cruz joined Duarte about

32 years ago and also learned how to graft plants from Lopez. Describing her as a "very good teacher" with a lot of patience, Cruz said Lopez always made an effort to answer any questions she might have.

"Everything she wanted us to learn, she taught it patiently so that we could understand it well," Cruz said in Spanish. "I am grateful for everything she has taught me." Lopez already was a grafting supervisor when Olide joined Duarte. Throughout the years, he said they've worked together on different projects, including introducing manufacturing efficiencies within the nursery.

With an eye for detail, Lopez continually sought improvements, such as eliminating some labor steps in producing plants. She also embraced Lean production, a multifaceted approach designed to reduce manufacturing waste while maximizing value. When Olide became director of operations, he introduced labor forecasting and piece-per-labor efficiencies.

"She picked that right up and she ran with it," he said, reminiscing.

See 'Farmworker' on page 12



California Farm Bureau President, Shannon Douglas, shares thoughts on California Agricultural issues and the importance of advocacy.



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From 'Farmworker' on page 10

Based on the thousands of the people's lives she's touched during her 36 years at Duarte Nursery, Olide said, "There will never be another Paty. She will leave a big footprint."

JUAN GUZMAN

A 12-veteran of Barton Ranch, Juan Guzman treats the family-owned walnut operation as if it were his own, showing optimism and a true commitment to hitting his personal and professional growth.

"This young man walks through life with humility and expects very little in return," Joshua Barton of Barton Ranch wrote in his nomination. "He embodies an example of what business owners and our communities need in a leader."

Guzman has risen through the ranks of Barton Ranch, starting as a field-level employee and currently serving as system-wide ranch manager and spray manager. Along the way, he has sought to better himself by taking classes to improve his English; become proficient in Microsoft Excel, Outlook and Word; and complete short courses at the University of California, Davis.

Guzman also has a positive attitude that is contagious among his coworkers at a time when the walnut industry is going some trying times.

"He helped facilitate meaningful outcomes that come with morale shifts during industry swings," Barton said. And when labor is short, Guzman doesn't hesitate to jump in to fill the gaps.

He immigrated to the U.S. 20 years ago from Mexico and was eventually able to bring his wife and two children into the country after five years of

navigating the legalization process. Guzman became a U.S. citizen in 2023, completing the "American dream," Barton said.

When he's not working on the farm, Guzman devotes much of his spare time to his church, offering community service through outreach.

ANTONIO MACHUCA

Antonio "Tony" Machuca joined Gold Leaf Farming, a tree nut operation, just two years ago to focus on machinery and repairs. In that short period, he has gained the respect of his coworkers and taken on new leadership roles.

He's done so because of his experience, kindness and ability to build strong relationships, making him a natural born leader and a source of inspiration, said Pablo Gonzalez, Gold Leaf Farming supervisor.

After Machuca lost his direct supervisor and with only weekly guidance, he led his team to successfully and safely complete harvest on time. When faced with limited resources or challenging conditions, Gonzalez said Machuca finds a way to lead, motivate his team and deliver results.

Even when it's not required, Machuca may stay with his team to provide support and encouragement during difficult days, during sprays or during the long days of har-

vest.

"Tony has demonstrated exceptional leadership, resilience and responsibility, especially during challenging periods," Gonzalez said. "He naturally earned the trust of his team through his experience, positive attitude and respectful approach, becoming a strong and effective foreman despite joining last."

ALEX PADILLA

When Wrangler J Ranch LP in Oakdale lost an employee midseason, Assistant Manager Alex Padilla didn't hesitate and performed the work of two people to help the almond, walnut and cattle operation save money.

All told, that amounted to more than 440 hours during 2025, said ranch manager Willem Larsen.

Padilla did the bulk of the tree and weed spraying on 230 acres as well as the tractor work that involved mowing and preharvest field preparation. He also took over much of the irrigating.

The 2025 season was a bad one for ground squirrels, which did a number on their irrigation systems. Repairing the systems frequently meant being soaked head to toe at the end of the day. Yet, Larsen said, Padilla never complained about often miserable conditions.



Paty's grandson, Ernesto Millan, accepted the Farmworker of the Year Award on his grandmother's behalf.



Juan Guzman, Gold Award Winner.

“He knew we were short a guy to help us this year, yet he persevered with the task at hand every day,” Larsen said.

On the cattle side, Larsen joked that Padilla should enter the Oakdale Rodeo because he could take down an uncooperative yearling steer as well as any professional steer wrestler.

Padilla also has unique problem-solving skills, although he never went to trade school or trained as a mechanic. He uses critical thinking to walk through the problem and get it solved.

“This man is essential to every aspect to our farm business,” Larsen said.

BERNARDO AGUAYO

After following his father and uncle from a Mexican cattle operation to the San Joaquin Valley, Bernardo Aguayo found his home at Superior Fruit Ranch Inc. Of the 17 years he’s been at the operation, seven of those have been as foreman.

Superior Fruit Ranch Owner Scott Long said Aguayo learned about the multiple crops and propagation techniques used on the ranch as well as how to discern exceptional from average. He continues to learn, always striving for better results.

Aguayo easily assimilated into the U.S. and the ranch culture by learning English, understanding previously unknown crops and radiating positivity in any task he performed, Long said.

He described Aguayo as having a quiet demeanor but not being a pushover. He also leads by example, showing others diligence and a strong work ethic.

Whether at work, at home or in his community, Aguayo takes pride in his actions. He also provides for his family, the operation and the community, benefiting everybody, Long said.



Antonio Machuca, Silver Award Winner.

As part of that, Aguayo supports local churches, food banks, his children’s activities, youth sports and high school ag programs.

“Bernardo is a

See 'Farmworker' on page 14



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Carl Groom, Honorable Mention



Alex Padilla, Honorable Mention



Bernardo Aguayo, Honorable Mention

good, honest, intelligent hard-working man, gainfully employed and always willing to listen, contribute and help others," Long said. "I am truly lucky to have him as an employee and a friend."

CARL GROOM

With 34 years under his belt at Gambini Farms, Carl Groom has become a jack of all trades, doing everything from running the walnut huller and back-hoe to applying fertilizer and pesticides and fixing fences, concrete pipes and sprinklers. "He will come in early or stay late, no matter what you need — he helps anyway he can," said Supervisor and Owner Rod Gambini. The farm grows tree nuts and forage crops.

Groom is conscientious and sets a high standard in his duties. But he isn't afraid to help co-workers and makes sure the job is done right the first time.

Always seeking self-improvement, Groom attends spray classes and the farm show to gain information on the latest equipment or

regulations, Gambini said. And Groom isn't afraid to ask questions and seek ways to make the farming operations better or easier.

"He's like family," Gambini said. "Our kids have grown up together, and I could not imagine this farm without him."

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AFBF Survey Shows Fertilizer Impacts

Earlier this week, the American Farm Bureau Federation released the results of a survey on trends and impacts related to fertilizer purchasing. The results show that roughly 70% of respondents are concerned they may be unable to purchase all their fertilizer needs this year.

In California, only about a quarter of respondents reported pre-booking fertilizer ahead of planting—slightly lower than the average in other Western states, though not as low as in the Southern region.

The survey was conducted in response to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's push for more accurate data on fertilizer markets to better assess potential aid moving forward. California Farm Bureau thanks the nearly 250 members who submitted responses. Staff contact: Matthew Viohl, mviohl@cfbf.com.

Wolf-Livestock Coexistence Bill Passes Senate Natural Resources Committee

Senate Bill 1135, authored by state Sen. Catherine Blakespear, D-Encinitas, also known as the California Wildlife Coexistence

Act, seeks to formalize and expand the state's approach to managing conflicts between human activity and wildlife. The bill's most significant impact is the permanent establishment of the Wolf-Livestock Coexistence and Compensation Program. The program provides two critical layers of support: financial compensation for livestock losses due to wolf depredation and funding for proactive, nonlethal deterrents.

California Farm Bureau holds an "oppose unless amended" position on the bill due to concerns about practicability and ensuring that any requirements for nonlethal deterrents are appropriate for the land and the current wolf conditions in a given area.

Staff contact: Steven Fenaroli, sfenaroli@cfbf.com.

H-2A Minimum Wage Bill Amended, Narrowed

Assembly Bill 2646, authored by Assemblywoman Maggy Krell, D-Sacramento, which imposes a \$19.75 minimum wage on certain California agricultural employees, was amended on March 25 to narrow its scope.

See 'Updates' on page 18

Scouting: Your First Defense Against Navel Orangeworms

Navel orangeworm (NOW) is the most damaging pest in almonds. Not only does NOW damage the nut and cause crop loss, but it can lead to aflatoxin, a food safety concern. Being vigilant at scouting for NOW, early and often, leads to better decisions and timing of crucial treatment applications. The timelier the applications, the more effective your IPM program will be. Scouting and monitoring are a crucial part for all pests and diseases in an almond orchard.

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From 'Updates' on page 17

In its current form, the bill applies the minimum wage mandate to nonresident agricultural workers whose employment is approved by the California Employment Development Department or the Labor and Workforce Development Agency—a description of state agency actions that allow employment of H-2A visa temporary agricultural workers and “corresponding” workers employed by the same employer within the same county. California Farm Bureau opposes the bill.

Staff contact: Bryan Little, blittle@cfbf.com.

Farm Bureau Supports Senate Bill 1183

On April 22, the Senate Environmental Quality Committee will hear Senate Bill 1183 by state Sen. Anna Caballero, D-Merced. The bill would require the California Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a study on the physical health, economic and social impacts of large-scale solar development across agricultural landscapes in the Central Valley.

As industrial-scale solar generation, storage and transmission projects continue to expand throughout the region, SB 1183 would be the first measure to require the state to evaluate the cumulative impacts of this development. The study would assess potential effects on rural communities and agricultural economies and could inform



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future efforts to mitigate unintended consequences associated with large-scale land use changes. California Farm Bureau supports SB 1183 and will provide testimony at the April 22 committee hearing. Staff contact: Peter Ansel, pansel@cfbf.com.

Amended SB 1097 Advances, Raising Questions on Transmission Expansion and Farmland Impacts

The Senate Environmental Quality Committee recently adopted significant amendments to Senate Bill 1097 by state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, and advanced the bill to the Senate Energy and Utilities Committee for its second policy hearing next week. California Farm Bureau opposes the bill unless it is amended and will be reviewing the latest changes. SB 1097 would provide an exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA, for upgrades to existing electric transmission lines, including advanced re-

conducting, to support the expansion of renewable energy projects. Farm Bureau's concerns center on the potential impacts of the exemption on productive agricultural land, as transmission easements can be extensive.

Recent amendments would limit any new facilities needed to support reconductoring to no more than a 10% increase in footprint on lands that include conservation easements. However, lands under Williamson Act contracts are not included in this limitation. As a result, Farm Bureau is evaluating how the amended bill may affect those lands, particularly in the context of a potential CEQA exemption. The Large-Scale Solar Association and Rural County Representatives of California support the bill, continuing a trend from last year in which RCRC supported large-scale solar-related policies, including Assembly Bill 1156, which remains on the Assembly inactive file.

Staff contact: Peter Ansel, pansel@cfbf.com.

Drought Task Force to Meet April 17 with New Farm Bureau Representation

California's drought task force, the Drought Resilience Interagency and Partners Collaborative, or DRIP, will hold a hybrid public meeting on April 17 in Sacramento. The DRIP Collaborative was established in 2023 by the California Department of Water Resources in coordination with the California State Water Resources Control Board and other state agencies to help plan and coordinate drought preparation, emergency response and relief consistent with Senate Bill 552 (2021). This is an open public meeting. California Farm Bureau staff were appointed to the task force in February by the Newsom administration. Staff contact: Alex Biering, abiering@cfbf.com.

US Forest Service Approves \$248 Million for Rural Schools Program

On Tuesday, the U.S. Forest Service announced it will issue \$248 million in funds for the Secure Rural Schools Program. The program helps provide support for schools, roads and other municipal services across more than 700 counties. It remains a critical federal program in terms of rural community support, with nearly \$2.5 billion in funds distributed in the past decade alone. More information on the program can be found here. Staff contact: Matthew Viohl, mviohl@cfbf.com.

Antitrust Bill Hampering Co-ops Advances

Assembly Bill 1776 by Assemblywoman Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, D-Winters, was approved by the Assembly Judiciary Committee on April 7 and is pending third reading. The bill is opposed by a large coalition of business and agriculture interests that are concerned that it needlessly expands the reach of California antitrust law and will chill common business practices like those used for price discovery by agricultural co-ops. California Farm Bureau opposes the bill. Staff contact: Bryan Little

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California Poultry Federation Op-Ed

By: Bill Mattos is President of California Poultry Federation.

California's animal agriculture industry is the backbone of the Central Valley, creating jobs, economic stability, and a reliable food source for families across California and the country. For centuries, the Central Valley's rich soil and ideal climate have welcomed animal agriculture.

That's why I'm particularly disturbed by the tactics of animal rights extremists from Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) who are targeting poultry (and dairy), and some of the supermarkets that sell our products. After Sonoma County voters overwhelmingly rejected DxE-backed Measure J in November—a law that would have shut down

large-scale animal agriculture in Sonoma County and threatened its economy—DxE members, who lost a very convincing trial in Sonoma County, have shifted to more extreme tactics.

These activists have disrupted local restaurants, harassed poultry workers and their families, and trespassed on private property to steal birds from chicken houses. They've also targeted employees at their homes, hanging "Wanted" posters with photos and names of local workers demanding their resignations simply for doing their jobs. These dangerous and disruptive tactics have no place in our Valley or our state.

As someone who has spent more than three decades working in the poultry world, I can vouch for the integrity of this industry and the animal industry in California and

have seen firsthand how our state's agricultural workers are setting the standard for humane and responsible chicken raising. California's leading poultry companies (Foster Farms, Pitman Family Farms, Petaluma Poultry, Diestel Turkeys, and others) are proof that large-scale ranches can benefit communities and consumers while maintaining the highest standards of animal care.

DxE's vicious and repeated targeting of some poultry facilities, leaders in the ethical, sustainable raising of poultry, goes to show how out of touch they are. Our industry's animal welfare practices go above and beyond industry standards to ensure an elevated level of animal care, providing free-range environments where chickens can roam, peck, and dust-bathe naturally in the outdoors. These chickens enjoy sunshades and roosts and are fed a diet with

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Look beyond the chants of angry activists, and you'll find an environment that allows these birds to express their natural animal instincts. I suspect what's most concerning to DxE is that our local companies are proof that large-scale animal agriculture can be humane and sustainable. They're doing things the right way. When neither the facts nor the people in California are on your side, guerrilla tactics appear to be the only answer.

If these activist groups were honest with the public, they would admit that their goal is to end all animal agriculture and consumption. Eliminating an entire industry

from our Central Valley would also result in the loss of thousands of jobs it provides. So, while they harass people at their homes, block grocery store entrances, and break into local ranches, their end goal is even more destructive.

Now is the time to stand with our local agricultural workers against extremist intimidation tactics. Our poultry companies uphold the highest standards of animal welfare while feeding families and fueling the California economy. We must reject extremist activism and instead support businesses that do things the right way.

Consumers, policymakers, and community leaders should advocate for responsible

agriculture. By supporting ethical ranches like those we have right here in Stanislaus County and across California, we reinforce a future in which raising chickens and other animals is sustainable, humane, and beneficial for all. Let's not be misled by scare tactics that have no place in California.



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MJC's Bird Comfort Poultry Program Teaches More Than Egg Production

Written by Kathryn Kim Ramos, Sisbro Innovation Website and Digital Marketing Consultant

At Modesto Junior College, the poultry program is doing far more than producing eggs for the community. Under the leadership of Animal Science Instructor Tim Truax, the program gives students hands-on experience in agriculture, business management, animal care, and public communication, while also supplying local consumers with a product they have come to trust.

Truax, a Turlock native, came to MJC as a student before transferring to Fresno, where he earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees. He is now in his fifth year at MJC, where he oversees both the poultry and sheep facilities. He stepped into the role after longtime instructor Marlies Boyd, who taught at MJC for more than 25 years and built a strong reputation in the poultry industry.

While many people know MJC for its eggs, the poultry unit itself has been around long before Truax or Boyd. The program reflects the long-standing importance of poultry in the Central Valley, which is now one of the

largest poultry production regions in California. According to Truax, MJC's goal is to expose students to as many parts of the poultry industry as possible. The program raises broilers for meat, maintains a year-round egg-laying flock, raises pheasants, and is even planning a future squab facility.

One of the most impressive parts of the program is how much responsibility students carry. The birds are managed daily by students, with Truax serving as a guide and mentor. Students collect eggs, wash and package them, make deliveries, keep detailed records, monitor flock health, and help identify problems before they become serious. In many ways, they are not just students, they are learning to become business managers.

Truax also values the manual side of the work. While larger operations may rely heavily on digital systems, MJC students still pick up a pencil to record data by hand. It is a meaningful part of the

learning process, proving that not all important lessons begin with technology and that there is something almost sacred about learning the fundamentals manually first.

"We're a place of learning, but we're a business, a living, breathing business," Truax said.

That business mindset is central to the program. Students learn that agriculture depends on good animal care, and that bird comfort directly affects production. If the hens are healthy, comfortable, and



MIKE HEINRICH

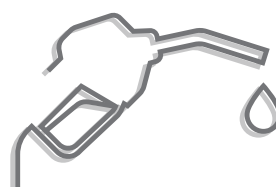
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stress-free, they lay more consistently. That means students must understand nutrition, lighting, temperature, disease prevention, and egg quality. MJC's birds live in a cage-free environment, are protected by strict biosecurity protocols, and are managed in conditions designed to keep them productive and healthy.

Students also learn that agriculture is not only about animals, but about people. The poultry unit receives many questions from customers about how the birds are raised, whether the eggs are organic, and why the hens are not pasture-raised. Truax said stu-

dents must learn to answer these questions with patience, grace, and clarity.

"Our students have to communicate how our product is produced and why it's produced the way that it is," he said.

That communication matters because consumer concerns are real, even when they are based on misunderstandings. Truax explained that pasture-raised systems may sound appealing, but in their setting, exposing hundreds of birds to wild birds would create a much greater disease risk. Helping students explain those realities respectfully is part of their education.

The program also helps students see poultry as a career path they may never have considered. Truax noted that most people working in poultry did not originally plan to enter the industry. Through conferences, guest speakers, and hands-on work, he hopes to expose

students to careers ranging from animal care to marketing, accounting, and operations.

Above all, Truax says the most important thing MJC produces is not eggs, it is students.

"Our commodity that we produce at MJC is students above anything else," he said. For the community, supporting the poultry program means more than buying eggs. It means investing in the next generation of agricultural leaders, one dozen at a time. And in the near future, the community will also have MJC sausage and beef products to look forward to, expanding even more ways for local residents and this writer to support the college's agricultural programs.

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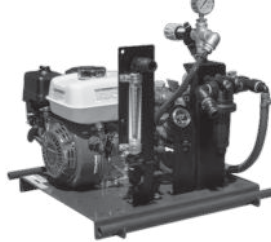
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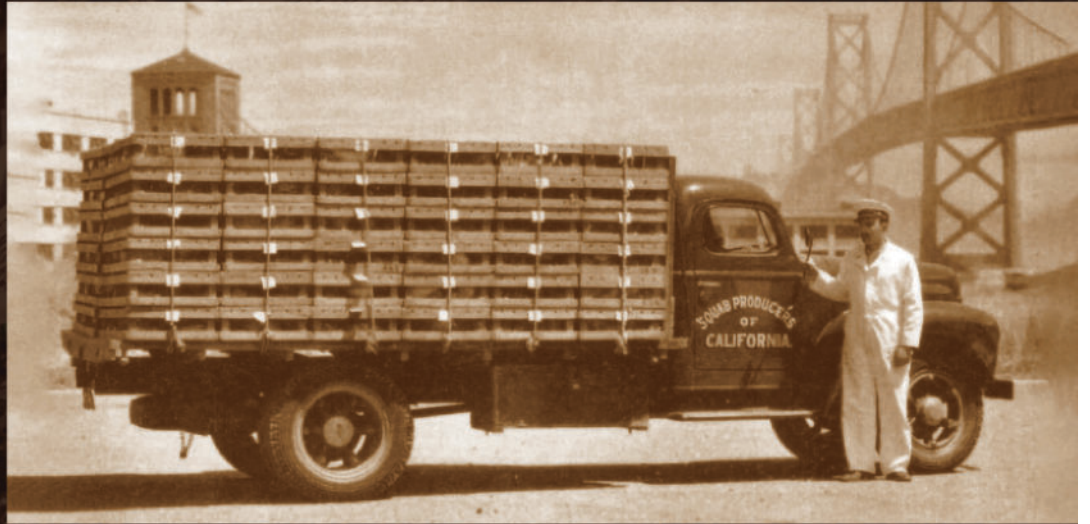
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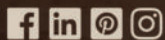
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Roses begin blooming in the Central Valley
Roses are blooming in the Central Valley. Abi Dirske, a Stanislaus County flower farmer, said her flowers came into bloom earlier than usual this spring. “We usually get roses toward the end of April. They’re starting a few weeks early this year,” Dirske told Ag Alert® in a field report. “Roses go in flushes, and typically a flush lasts about two to three weeks, depending on the variety. Then they take about six weeks, depending on the time of year, to regrow for the next flush.” Dirske said she expects a busy springtime for flower sales. She added that the April rainstorms that drenched much of the state for a few days could make it challenging to protect her roses from disease. “We’ll have to keep an eye on that,” Dirske said. “Roses are very disease prone. We get powdery mildew and rust, but if you stay on top of it, it doesn’t affect us.”

March heat wave affected crop timing for California farmers

The record-breaking heat wave last month wreaked havoc on the timing of some California crops. Celeste Alonzo, who grows vegetables in Riverside County, said the unusual weather brought her sweet corn harvest forward by nearly two weeks. “We’re harvesting corn, and we usually don’t harvest until around April 10. We thought we’d be harvesting on April 3, which is still ahead of schedule, but we started harvesting in late March. We had early fruit and early flowering,” Alonzo told Ag Alert® earlier this month in a field report. Meanwhile, the high temperatures caused problems for Alonzo’s bell peppers. “That early flowering and fruiting combined with the heat has been a challenge, especially with the baby plants,” she said. “We’re making sure they’re getting enough water so they don’t die in the heat wave. We’re just not used to this weather at this time.”

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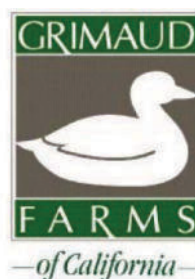
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