

The Stanislaus Farm News

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Cristal Da Silveira presented a giant check to Waterford FFA members worth \$3,010 from her benefit art show last summer.

Photo by Cristal Da Silveira

See full story on page 3

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From Orchard to Easel: How One Leader Turned Almonds into Art

By Vicky Boyd, SCFB

Over the centuries, many philosophers, writers and poets have explored the idea that "art and beauty are all around us," as they saw it in nature, human creation and even suffering.

Cristal Da Silveira, food safety and plant supervisor for Grizzly Nut in Waterford, embraced that philosophy when she organized and hosted an almond-themed art show in June 2025 that benefited the Waterford FFA.

She also was a member of the Almond Leadership Program's Class 16, and her event satisfied the special project required of all participants.

THE ART OF ALMONDS

Da Silveira said she was inspired by the sepia-toned black-and-white photos of old farms she saw during her first Almond Conference in Sacramento in 2024. During the meeting, she also heard speakers ask how the industry was getting almonds into the hands of the public to consume.

"What if I did something like it — it's such a beautiful visual message?" Da Silveira thought of the old images.

She started with an idea of a photo show but decided to expand it to include drawings, paintings, sculptures and fiber arts. The only rule was the art had to showcase almonds.

She contacted the local Girl Scout troop, local artists and Visit Modesto, all of whom she said were very supportive.

Da Silveira even had a past winner of the Visit Modesto's Van Gogh Challenge donate two canvases to her. The Modesto event was originally inspired by van

Having never organized an event of this size, Da Silveira said she was initially apprehensive. But most of the people she approached said "yes."

A friend who had a rustic barn used for events offered up the Waterford venue for free. The Fruit Yard, J&J Ramos Farms, Resendiz Family Fruit Barn and Dust Bowl were among local businesses that agreed to donate food or beverages. Someone else stepped up to operate a photo booth.

And she recruited Waterford FFA students to help with set-up, traffic control and tear-down.

"Honestly, I'm kind of shocked how many people were willing to help me and hold out their arms," Da Silveira said.

SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION

See 'Art' on page 4

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During the show, attendees could stroll among the tables, viewing displayed artwork while they snacked on locally produced products. Much like a silent auction, they could also bid on pieces.

Part of Da Silveira's objective was to educate visitors about almonds, so she printed facts about the crop on place cards that she distributed around the tables.

"I wanted my event to be about almonds and not just farmers," she said.

As part of leadership Class 16, she had learned how the Almond Board held a large golf tournament annually to raise funds for FFA. She said it felt only appropriate that her project benefit the local FFA chapter. At the end of the day, Da Silveira raised more than \$3,000.

Jennifer Pierce, a Waterford FFA advisor,

said helping with the art show was rewarding and provided a lesson for the students.

"Opportunities like this mean so much to our students, not only because they get to volunteer and serve the community but also because it shows them that the community values and invests back into them," she said.

The donation will go to directly support Waterford High School students who want

to attend the California FFA Leadership Conference in late March in Ontario, California. Typically, about 20 attend each year, but Pierce said the Waterford FFA program has been growing. Thanks to Da Silveira's efforts, closer to 25 students will now be able to go.

The art show and FFA fundraiser



Much like a silent auction, art show attendees could bid on pieces. Photo by Cristal Da Silveira



Cristal Da Silveira displays fiber art that Grizzly Nut President Mike Staack said he just "had to have." The piece features honeybees, lady bugs and butterflies along with hand-crocheted almond flowers in the tree. Photo by Vicky Boyd



also garnered Da Silveira the top leadership project title as voted on by her Class 16 cohorts.

A GROWING PASSION

Da Silveira didn't grow up on a farm and had no real exposure to agriculture. About four years ago, her friend, Fill Muñoz, told her of a job opening for quality control at Grizzly Nut where she worked.

At the time, Da Silveira was a stay-at-home mother of twins. Even though the children were getting older, she still wanted to be home when they got out of school.

The job at Grizzly Nut fits her schedule perfectly with an early morning start time that allows her to finish work before school

lets out.

"I started here four years ago when I knew nothing about almonds, and now I'm food safety coordinator and plant supervisor," Da Silveira said.

During her tenure at the Waterford nut processor, she has also developed a passion for the industry.

"I really didn't have any idea about ag," Da Silveira said. "I didn't even know we sized almonds. I didn't even know there was more than one variety of almonds. I've learned so much here beyond just food safety. In this past year through the leadership program, I've learned even more."

And it was Muñoz, a previous Almond Board leadership class participant, who encouraged Da Silveira to ap-

ply for the program originally. In fact, Da Silveira marked the third Grizzly Nut employee who had graduated from the leadership program.

Grizzly Nut President and Owner Mike Staack said he considered the program important not only to his operation and almond production but to all of agriculture. All three Grizzly Nut program participants were employees who had been with the company a while, showed leadership potential and needed to take the next step.

"What they've gotten out of the program are things you can't teach at work," Staack said. "They've become more informed about what our industry is about and not only almonds but all of farming."

The leadership program consists of about 110 hours of seminars and events, plus an additional 70 hours of interactive learning to complete assignments and projects. Da Silveira credited her husband, family, co-workers and Staack for their help and support during the year-long program.

"It wasn't easy," Da Silveira said. "I felt like I had three full-time jobs. Honestly, I loved the experience and learned so much. I grew so much as a person. I learned to ask for help and not try to do everything on my own."

And that newfound purpose spurred her to join the Almond Board's Almond Quality, and Food Safety and Services Committee.



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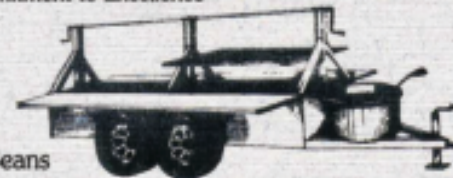
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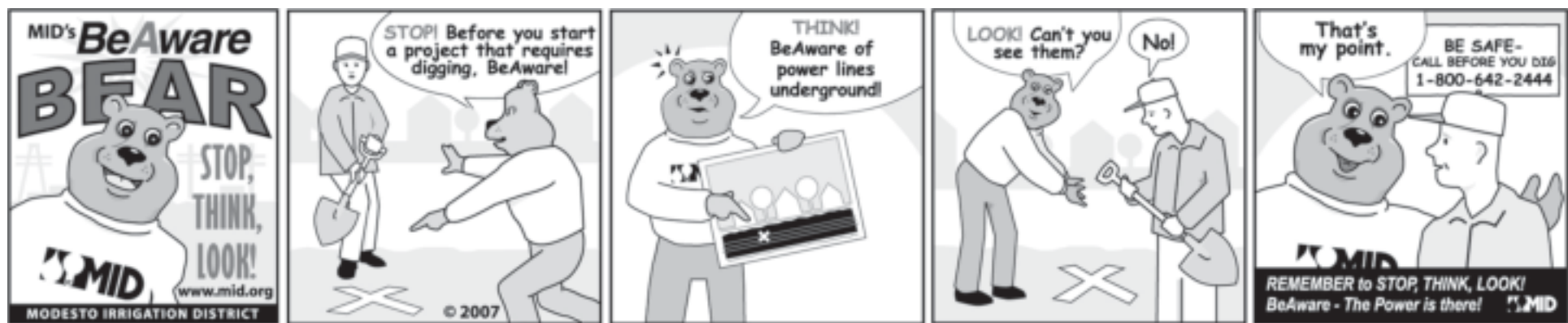




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Tuesday, February 24, 2026
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Future Farmers = Smarter Farms - How FFA is Leading Agriculture into the Digital Age

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

The Future Farmers of America (FFA) has long been a cornerstone of agricultural education, preparing young people across the country, and especially here in the Central Valley, to lead the farms, ranches, and ag-based businesses of tomorrow. But today's FFA students are doing far more than learning to plant, harvest, or care for livestock. They're stepping into the digital frontier, using tools like artificial intelligence (AI), drone technology, digital marketing, and precision agriculture to revolutionize the industry from the ground up.

In places like Stanislaus County and throughout Modesto, FFA programs are showing students how to blend tradition with technology. The result? A new generation of farmers who are just as comfortable with a tablet as they are with a tractor.

AI in Action

Artificial intelligence is no longer just a concept for Silicon Valley, it's now being used in barns, fields, and greenhouses across the country. Through FFA-led programs and partnerships with agricultural technology companies, students are learning how to use AI-powered sensors to monitor crop health, soil moisture, and livestock behavior.

Some students are even experimenting with machine learning to predict weather patterns or improve crop yields. Others are using image recognition tools to identify pests and diseases before they spread, giving them a competitive edge and helping reduce waste and chemical use.

This hands-on exposure to emerging tech gives FFA students real-world skills they can use to launch their own ag-tech startups, manage sustainable farms, or pursue careers in agricultural engineering.

Digital Tools for Business Growth

But innovation doesn't stop in the field. Today's FFA students are also learning how to market their farms, products, and services online. From building e-commerce websites to mastering social media platforms, these young entrepreneurs understand that having a strong digital presence is essential to reach modern consumers.

FFA chapters across Stanislaus County have

begun teaching students how to create brand identities, manage online reputations, and use digital ads to connect with local and regional markets. These skills help family farms stay competitive while empowering students to think beyond the traditional boundaries of agriculture.

The Central Valley Advantage

The Central Valley is already known as one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world, and FFA students here are perfectly positioned to lead the industry forward. By combining their deep roots in farming with a forward-thinking mindset, they're turning age-old practices into smart, efficient, and tech-savvy operations.

As more young leaders embrace AI and digital tools, they're setting a new standard for what farming looks like in the 21st century, cleaner, smarter, and more connected than ever before.

Supporting the Future

If you're a local business or resident, supporting your local FFA chapter is a smart investment in the future of agriculture. These students aren't just tomorrow's farmers, they're today's innovators. Let's continue to encourage and celebrate the ways FFA is planting the seeds of change, right here in Stanislaus County, throughout Modesto, and across the Central Valley.

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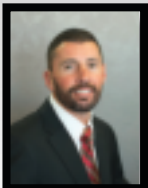
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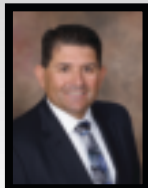
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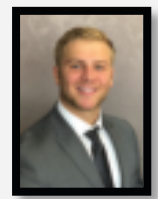
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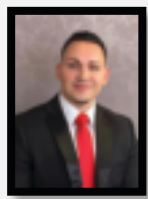
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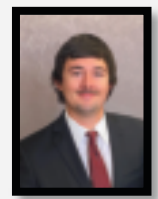
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Modesto High FFA

Modesto High is getting a new off campus school farm, and it's honestly a huge win for anyone who shows or is interested in showing at the fair. Raising an animal isn't easy, it takes time, responsibility, and a lot of daily work. This new farm gives our students a real place to keep and care for their animals if they don't have that space at home. That means more people can be a part of that experience, and more students get the chance to learn what it really takes to prepare an animal for show.

For our FFA members, this is a huge deal. Being part of the National FFA Organization is all about leadership, hard work, and learn by doing - this farm makes that even more possible. It gives students hands-on experience and helps them build skills they'll carry with them long after high school. It also connects us even more to agriculture here in Modesto, where farming is such a big part of our community. The new farm isn't just about animals, it's about opportunity, growth, and giving students a place to succeed.

Overall, this is something our FFA chapter and ag students can be really excited about. We can't wait to see what everyone accomplishes with this new space. It's

going to help more students get involved, support each other, and take pride in the work they put in each and every day. This farm isn't just building better projects; it's building stronger students. Stronger leaders, and a stronger program for the future.



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2026 Honey Bee Update

By Matt Beekman, Executive Board Member, California State Beekeepers Association

Source: Almond Board of California

At the Almond Conference in December, I shared an update on the state of beekeeping and the challenges our industry continues to face. This article is a follow-up to that presentation and provides a current snapshot as we head into almond pollination.

Without question, the work of raising strong, productive colonies has become increasingly difficult. One complicating factor is that it's often impossible to know how well bees have survived the winter until just weeks before pollination begins. Even with new monitoring technologies, no one predicted the level of colony losses experienced last year.

A Tightening Supply of Colonies

One trend is clear: the total number of colonies available for almond pollination is declining. Information collected at California Department of Food and Agriculture Border Protection Stations (BPS) on the number of colonies crossing into California over the past five years, illustrates a gradual downward trend.

This decline reflects mounting pressures on the beekeeping industry, including rising costs, ongoing colony stress, and long-term attrition among commercial beekeepers.

Rising Costs and Shrinking Margins

As almond growers know all too well, the cost of doing business—particularly in California—continues to rise.

At the same time as costs associated with beekeeping have risen

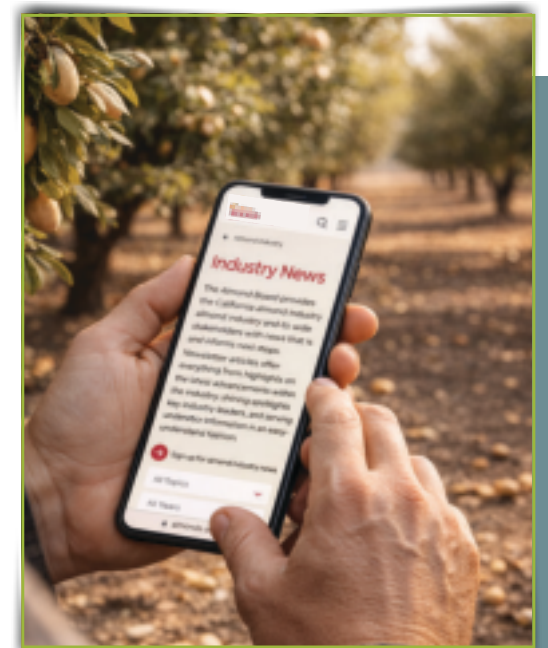
See 'ABC Bees' on page 14

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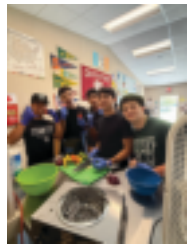



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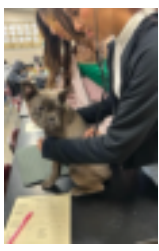

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Central Valley FFA

CATA Outstanding Program Application Supporting Materials

 <p>CDE/LDE: The Central Valley FFA Dairy Judging Team placed 5th overall in the state at the end of the 2024-2025 judging season.</p>	 <p>Partnerships: A paid student employee working over the summer at the 6.5 acre school farm. This student worked specifically in our 4 rows of table grapes, making sure they received the proper care and maintenance.</p>
 <p>Curriculum: A small group of Advanced Floral students with bridesmaids bouquets they made for a wedding this September!</p>	 <p>28 of the animal exhibitors at the Stanislaus County Fair. Not pictured are 22 students who entered various horticulture, floriculture, and vegetable exhibits.</p>
 <p>Career Readiness: Our Ag Mechanics pathway makes sure to take students to hands on apprentice related conferences and expositions in order to offer the students real world experiences outside of the classroom.</p>	 <p>Community Outreach: Our nearly 100 Ag Leadership students present to over 2000 TK-1st graders during our annual district wide Fall Festival. Presentation topics cover the following areas: dairy, tractors, pigs/goats, seeds/planting, pumpkins/growth, and cookie ingredients.</p>
 <p>Career Readiness: DeHart Technical School in Modesto, CA is a trade school that trains students for hands-on careers in heating and air conditioning, electrical, and plumbing. Pictured is a group of Advanced Ag Mechanics students getting a tour of the facility and overview of daily course work depending on speciality.</p>	 <p>CDE/LDE: The Floral Judging team placed 2nd High Team at the 2026 Arbuckle Field Day. With one member placing 3rd high individual.</p>
 <p>Marketing: Example of a SAE spotlight that gets posted to our social media. This student was nominated by a teacher in our department. We post this on social media, post a flyer in all ag classrooms, and post a flyer in our glass case on the main campus.</p>	 <p>Marketing: Example of a Member of the Month post. Students for this are nominated by teachers or FFA officers. We post this on social media, post a flyer in all ag classrooms, and post a flyer in our glass case on the main campus.</p>
 <p>Career Readiness: Each year, we ask local businesses, community members, and advisory members to serve as judged for our Mock Interview Event. Every capstone level class must complete a job portfolio consisting of a resume and cover letter. Finally we host this event to give the capstone class students real world interview scenarios with in time feedback.</p>	 <p>Career Readiness: Stiles Custom Metal in Ceres, CA provided Ag Mechanics students with a tour of their facility, as well as shared valuable career opportunities for prospective students.</p>

 <p>Curriculum: Students in the food science class start the year learning knife skills by using fresh tomatoes, onions, and peppers grown on our school farm. The crops were started by last year's students, and harvested by this year's class.</p>	 <p>Community/Marketing: The last two years, the district has thrown a large CTE showcase, where local tech schools set up information booths and schools in the district can showcase their CTE programs as well. The event is open to all Ceres Unified students, parents, and staff to attend. Pictured here are students passing out information packets as guests walked into the event.</p>
 <p>As a department, we value staff culture. In order to model what we ask our students to do, we try to participate in all dress up days that any club or ASB team sets up on campus. Halloween is a BIG deal on our campus amongst staff. Pictured here is our group photo after WINNING the department halloween costume contest.</p>	 <p>Community: Students serving at a local pancake breakfast. Our students want to serve the community, so we try to connect to local firehouses and community groups to help with setting up, cleaning up, or serving at any local events. We ask that students wear something CV related while serving if possible, to encourage a positive connection with the community for the future.</p>
 <p>CDE/LDE: The student pictured is actively competing on the CV Vine Pruning Team. This is a new team this season for CV. We have vines on our school farm, making practice more accessible to students.</p>	 <p>Community: Students from local chapters were asked to serve at the Valley Wide Cooperative Regional Meeting in Modesto. Our students were tasked with running the silent auction, live auction, and greeting guests as they entered. The guest speaker was Jason Brown, former NFL football player for the Rams. The kids learned about his story from NFL fame to starting his own farming operation from the ground up.</p>

 <p>School Farm/Facilities: The Introduction to Agriculture students are heavily involved in the maintenance, care, harvesting, and selling of all fruits and vegetables grown and harvested at the CUSD school farm. Pictured here are over 30 totes of oranges that were harvested by these classes. Their hard work and dedication earned the school farm over \$20,000 in revenue last year alone.</p>	 <p>Community: Each year, students from Central Valley FFA donate over 500 cans to a local food bank during our seasonal can drive event. On top of donations, students also sort and load all the cans into large bins based on specific categories.</p>
 <p>Community: Grapes grown from the school farm being donated to other chapters to be used for the Lodi Wine and Grape Festival murals.</p>	 <p>Partnerships/Career Readiness: In our effort to increase our student's marketable skills, the Ag program realized the need for additional focus on soft skills and communication in order to increase postsecondary competitiveness. The Mentor Program brings together over 20 industry and community members each month to our site to have lunch with our students and participate in activities and mentoring to prepare students for opportunities outside of the classroom. After this program, students are able to apply to our Gateway to Gallo program which guarantees a select number of internships with Gallo the summer after graduation.</p>
 <p>Curriculum: Students in the Animal Science pathway get hands-on instruction practicing with various animals including rabbits, dogs, cows, chickens, goats, and pigs. Pictured are students performing a basic examination on a dog in the Vet Science course. Students cover basic skills as well as nutritional necessities and biosecurity practices for various species'.</p>	 <p>Curriculum: Students get hands-on experience with tractors and farm equipment in the Introduction to Agriculture and Animal Science classes. Pictured is a student spreading the compost that we create on site with debris from pruning and manure from farm animals</p>

From 'ABC Bees' on page 11

dramatically, the supplemental income many beekeepers rely on from honey production is declining. A major driver is the influx of cheaper and lower quality imported honey flooding U.S. markets. This erosion of secondary income further strains an industry already under pressure.

Bee Health Challenges Affect Everyone

Beekeepers are actively working to find solutions. A major focus is controlling the varroa mite, widely considered the primary driver of colony losses. Last year, the California Department of Pesticide Regulation registered two additional products for varroa control — important new tools for beekeepers. Timely approvals of new products such as these are critical for beekeepers to stay ahead of disease challenges.

Having better tools to manage varroa mite will have a direct impact on stronger colonies for almonds but also go a long way to make our industry more financially sustainable. Beyond getting more miticides on the market, beekeepers are seeing some positive developments recently with breeding more mite resistant queens

that naturally suppress mite reproduction. The Hilo Bee breeding project would be an example of this.

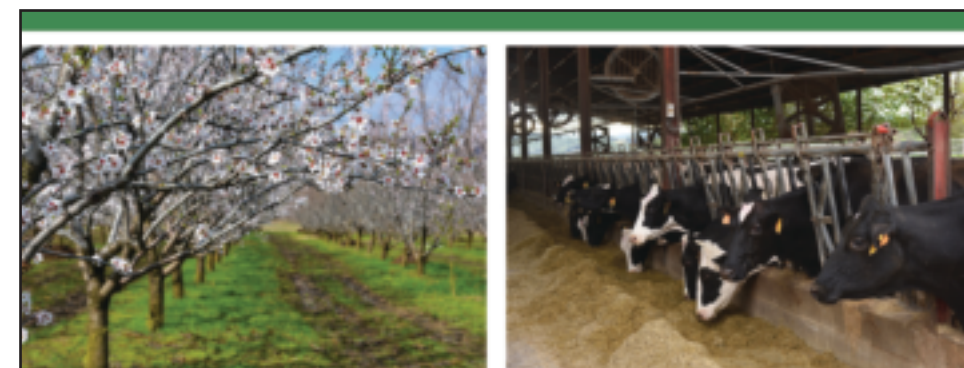
Pesticides and Pollinator Risk

On the topic of crop protection, I also want to share recent information regarding organo-silicone surfactants, which are often added to fungicide applications and have been shown to negatively affect bees. I encourage growers and PCAs to review this issue carefully.

Nutrition and the Loss of Forage

Another serious and growing issue for commercial beekeepers is the dramatic loss of land available for bee forage. Like all living things, bees require adequate nutrition to remain healthy. A single colony needs roughly 50 pounds of pollen annually to meet

See 'ABC Bees' on page 16



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From 'ABC Bees' on page 14

protein needs and 100 pounds of honey to meet carbohydrate needs.

Unfortunately, suitable forage is becoming increasingly scarce. Enrollment in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)—historically some of the best forage land for bees—declined significantly between 2007 and 2022, resulting in a net loss of 14.8 million acres and area larger than the entire Central Valley of California.

At the same time, beekeepers are losing access to federal and state public lands for a variety of reasons. Add urbanization and

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changing cropping patterns, and each year there is simply less land capable of meeting bees' nutritional needs.

Poor nutrition weakens colonies and makes them more susceptible to pests, pathogens, and viruses. Many in the industry believe this chronic nutritional stress is one of the underlying causes of widespread colony losses.

Working Together

Beekeepers are deeply grateful for the

Almond Board's investment in programs such as Seeds for Bees and for its continued support of research that benefits honey bee health.

The California State Beekeepers Association has also recently published a white paper outlining the top issues we are working on to sustain and improve colony health and survivability. More information is available on our website. I also participated in a panel discussion at the Almond Conference in December that expanded on many of the topics covered here; that presentation is available through the Almond Board.

Joining me on that panel was Elina L. Niño, Extension Apiculture Specialist with UC Davis, who presented research on self-fertile almond varieties. Her conclusion was clear: even self-fertile almonds will continue to rely on honey bees to produce crops profitably at one hive per acre. These varieties may reduce the number of colonies needed, but they will not eliminate the need for bees.

That reality underscores an essential truth: the partnership between almond growers and beekeepers remains critically important—and will continue to be so well into the future.



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Grape glut lessens as growers scrap vines

After a yearslong glut, the market for California winegrapes could reach equilibrium in the near future. The state saw “an explosion” of vineyard removals during the past two years, Jeff Bitter, president of the grower-owned marketing group Allied Grape Growers, said last month at the Unified Wine and Grape Symposium in Sacramento. Between October 2024 and August 2025, winegrape growers removed more than 38,000 acres across California—roughly 7% of the state’s acreage—leaving about 477,000 acres. Experts projected there will be future demand for around 410,000 acres of winegrapes in the state. “We haven’t got to where we need to be yet in order to balance supply and demand,” Bitter said. But he added that ongoing removals and an unknown amount of abandoned acreage due to financial stress could bring production close to the industry target as early as this year.

Bill brings back ag overtime tax credit proposal

A bipartisan bill introduced last month by California state legislators would create a tax credit to offset the cost to farmers of paying overtime wages. Senate Bill 921, authored by state Sen. Shannon Grove, R-Bakersfield, and state Sen. Melissa Hurtado, D-Sanger, aims to mitigate the impact that California’s agricultural overtime law has had on work opportunities for farmworkers. In 2016, the state adopted Assembly Bill 1066, which beginning in 2019 phased in a requirement that farmworkers—like workers in most sectors—be paid time and a half when they work more than 40 hours a week or eight hours a day. The law was intended to boost earnings for farmworkers. But research indicates it reduced farmworker income as employers cut hours to avoid paying overtime. “Behind every meal is a story of love, sacrifice and hard work in the fields,” Hurtado said in a statement. “SB 921 honors the sweat and sacrifice behind our food with a modern, fair approach to wages.”

Solving veterinary shortage is crucial for agriculture

California’s agriculture sector leads the nation due in part to the state’s thriving dairy, cattle and poultry sectors, all of which rely on veterinarians. However, the U.S. Department of Agriculture last year identified 243 rural veterinary shortage areas across the country—an all-time high—including in counties across California. “We currently face a critical shortage of food-animal veterinarians nationwide,” Gary S. May, chancellor of the University of California, Davis, said in an Ag Alert® commentary. “That’s why UC Davis is expanding its capacity to train future generations of veterinarians who will return to their communities and serve the state.” The campus’ veterinary school recently received a \$120 million gift from philanthropists Joan and Sanford I. Weill. May said the funding will be used to “expand its impact by training these future doctors, advancing large-animal care and strengthening California’s health and agricultural future at an unprecedented scale.”

Farmer: Egg prices lowest in years after overproduction post-bird flu

California egg producer Frank Hilliker has recently received lower prices for his eggs

than at any point in the past four or five years. “That’s due to overproduction after bird flu,” Hilliker told Ag Alert® in a field report. “When prices were high, a lot of egg farmers put more chickens in. There’s huge overproduction in the United States, which is keeping prices low.” The San Diego County producer said egg sales are up this time of year, but it isn’t enough to make up for the lower prices. “The problem is we’re selling the eggs for less than it costs to produce them,” Hilliker said. He said his farm has continued implementing strict measures to protect his flock from bird flu. “We’re doing the same thing we’ve been doing because it’s been working well. We limit visitors, keep our biosecurity tight and make sure we have healthy birds,” Hilliker said.

Tricolored blackbird conservation funding threatened



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A U.S. Department of Agriculture program that pays farmers to protect tricolored blackbirds nesting on their land could be significantly impacted due to the omission of the program's primary payment scenario in a recent draft released by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Tricolored blackbirds, which gained protection as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act in 2018, often nest in winter silage fields planted by dairy farmers. By agreeing to delay harvest where the birds nest, California farmers have helped save a species that once faced potential extinction. The tricolored blackbird Regional Conservation Partnership Program typically pays farmers \$700 to \$1,100 per acre to delay harvest of their silage crops. "The omission of silage delay as a payment scenario for the 2026 season would significantly hinder the ability to effectively protect tricolored blackbird colonies," said Richard Filgas, assistant director of policy advocacy for the California Farm Bureau.

'Unrelenting' fog aids Central Valley fruits and nuts

Farmers and researchers say persistent tule fog throughout the Central Valley in recent months could help the region's fruit and nut trees achieve the chilling hours they need to go into an effective winter dormancy, setting the trees up for a successful bloom and crop set. The low-lying fog layer, named after a sedge native to Central Valley marshes, is created by moist soils capped by a high-pressure weather system. NASA described a tule fog blanket stretching 400 miles from Redding to Bakersfield from Nov. 24-Dec. 9, 2025, as "unrelenting." The dense fog returned in January for several more days. "I do believe that the chill may have been more effective this year because of so many days with fog," said Ted De Jong, a University of California, Davis, pomology professor emeritus. Around Davis, he said, "this has been one of the foggiest years since the '90s."

Transplant nurseries celebrate seed improvements

The supply chain for California-grown vegetables runs year-round thanks to a beneficial partnership between seed companies and transplant nurseries, whose products allow growers to gain a head start on the season, ensuring earlier harvests and higher, more uniform yields. Since the 1990s, transplant nurseries have provided vegetable growers a shortcut from seed germination to harvest, shaving up to 60 days off the time that leafy greens, cauliflower, melons, processing tomatoes and other vegetables are in the field. According to the Vegetable Transplant Nursery Association, seed quality is the single most important input for vegetable transplant production, and recent improvements have made a difference for nurseries. "Seed quality is a top priority, and the science behind today's seed makes it far more reliable and productive than it once was," said Nicole Nicks, general manager of Westside Transplant based in Los Banos.

Farmer: Wine market woes mean less farm work in vineyards

A recent downturn in global wine consumption has created ripple effects throughout the supply chain in California's grape-growing regions. Since 2024, farmers have torn out tens of thousands of acres of vineyards. Despite the reduction in acreage, roughly a quarter of last year's crop went unpicked due to a lack of demand, according to industry estimates. With less vineyard acreage and growers cautious about investing in a crop that might not get sold, San Joaquin County grower Bruce Fry said work opportunities for vineyard crews have become scarcer. "There are lots of labor contractors looking for work," Fry told Ag Alert® in a field report. "There seem to be more people looking for work because so many vineyards have been taken out." Fry added he was "being cautious about our costs and inputs" such as pruning and herbicide applications this year. "We started pruning a little bit late compared to years past due to unknown markets for our grapes," he said.

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AB 1585, Wine Labeling: "American" or "United States" Appellation

Under existing federal law, wine may use the appellation "American" if at least 75% of the wine is derived from fruit or agricultural products grown in the United States. Assembly Bill 1585, by Damon Connolly, D-San Rafael, would establish a stricter standard for wine sold in California. For wine bottled on or after July 1, 2027, the bill would prohibit the use of the appellation "American" or "United States" unless 100% of the wine is derived from grapes or other agricultural products grown in the United States.

The bill authorizes the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control to seize wine labeled in violation of this requirement. Because violations would expand the scope of an existing crime, the measure would create a state-mandated local program. California Farm Bureau supports the bill. Staff contact: Chris Reardon, creardon@cfbf.com.

Amici Curiae Brief Filed in Case Challenging Captive Audience Meeting Ban

Senate Bill 399 added to the California Labor Code a provision that forbids an employer from taking or threatening adverse action against an employee for refusing to attend a meeting where the employer's opinion about joining or supporting a labor union will be communi-

cated. In other words, the statute prohibits an employer from requiring employees to attend a so-called "captive audience" meeting at which it will be explained why the workplace should remain union free. California Chamber of Commerce and California Restaurant Association sued in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California to enjoin the statute's enforcement. On Sept. 30, that court issued a preliminary injunction blocking its enforcement. Agreeing with the Chamber of Commerce and the Restaurant Association, the court held the statute is both preempted by the National Labor Relations Act and an impermissible content-based regulation of speech. The state of California has appealed the injunction's issuance to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court

of Appeals.

California Farm Bureau joined in an amici curiae brief, led by California Employment Law Council along with Institute for the American Worker and California Trucking Association, supporting the position of the Chamber of Commerce and Restaurant Association. California Chamber of Commerce, et al. v. Bonta, et al., 9th Circuit, Docket No. 25-6874. Staff contact: Carl Borden, cborden@cfbf.com.



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AB 1421 Road Usage Charge Study and Report

Existing law requires the Chair of the California Transportation Commission, in consultation with the Secretary of Transportation, to establish a Road Usage Charge Technical Advisory Committee. The committee is tasked with guiding the development and evaluation of a pilot program that explores mileage-based revenue collection as a potential alternative to the state's traditional gas tax system.

Assembly Bill 1421 by Assemblymember

Lori D. Wilson, D-Suisun City, builds on that framework by requiring CTC, in consultation with the California Transportation Agency, to consolidate existing research and develop formal recommendations related to a road user charge or mileage-based fee system. The bill directs the Commission to consult with relevant state agencies and stakeholders in preparing this work and to submit a comprehensive report of its findings and recommendations to the appropriate policy and fiscal committees of the Legislature no later than Jan. 1, 2027. California Farm Bureau is monitoring AB 1421. While the bill does not establish a

road usage charge at this time, it advances research and formal recommendations that could shape the future of California's transportation funding system. Given the potential impacts on rural drivers, agricultural operations and goods movement, California Farm Bureau will remain engaged throughout the process.

Staff Contact: Chris Reardon; creardon@cfbf.com.

Amici Curia Brief Supporting New H-2A Program AEW Methodology Submitted in Case Challenging It

In October, the U.S. Department of Labor issued its interim final rule that revised the methodology for calculating the Adverse Effect Wage Rate under the H-2A temporary agricultural worker visa program. The interim final rule provides H-2A employers with the possibility of significant AEW relief. In November, United Farm Workers union, UFW Foundation and 18 farmworkers sued in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California to enjoin the interim final rule.

On Feb. 5, California Farm Bureau and National Council of Agricultural Employers submitted to that court an amici curiae brief supporting the Labor Department's new way of setting wage rates under the H-2A program. *United Farm Workers et al. v. U.S. Department of Labor et al.*, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of California, Docket No. 1:25-cv-1614-KES-SKO.

Staff contact: Carl Borden, cborden@cfbf.com.

Fish and Game Commission Lists Mountain Lions in Southern and Central Coast as Threatened

The California Fish and Game Commission voted to list mountain lions in Southern California and along the Central Coast as threatened under state law. The decision follows a 2019 petition to list the species and a 2020 status review.

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MAKE LONG-LASTING MEMORIES



From 'Updates' on page 21

Over the past seven years, California Farm Bureau has actively engaged with the Commission to adamantly express concerns about the listing, arguing that available data does not demonstrate a population decline and that a threatened designation could limit wildlife management tools.

- 591 letters submitted by Farm Bureau members.
- Direct appeals from 19 county Farm Bureaus.

Staff contacts: Steven Fenaroli, sfenaroli@cfbf.com; Abby Carlson, acarlson@cfbf.com.

AFBF Urges Congressional Leaders to Move Forward on Addressing Ag Workforce

Late last week, the American Farm Bureau Federation sent a letter to congressional leadership urging action on critical agricultural workforce issues. California Farm

Bureau worked closely with several state Farm Bureau partners to help develop a set of priorities to guide a unified legislative proposal.

While significant work remains, this effort represents an important step toward aligning the Farm Bureau community around a comprehensive workforce strategy. The letter recognizes recent investments in border security while emphasizing the urgent need to address:

- Unsustainable costs within the H-2A program.
- Expansion of temporary guestworker programs to include nonseasonal commodities.
- A pathway to legal work authorization for existing domestic agricultural workers.
- Regulatory burdens that continue to increase labor-related costs.

Staff contact: Matthew Viohl, mviohl@cfbf.com.

com.

California Farm Bureau Leaders Participate in AFBF IAC Meetings

This week, eight California Farm Bureau members participated in the American Farm Bureau Federation's Issue Advisory Committee meetings in Washington, D.C. Held each February, the meetings mark an important step in AFBF's internal policy development process.

California's expanded representation provides valuable opportunities to elevate state and Western priorities within the broader Farm Bureau community. The agenda also included meetings with congressional offices and federal agency officials. California Farm Bureau thanks all participants for their engagement and leadership.

Staff contact: Matthew Viohl, mviohl@cfbf.com.

California Farm Bureau Signs Pesticide Coalition Letter on Promoting Science-Based Research

California Farm Bureau joined a broad coalition letter last week to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Secretary Lee Zeldin, urging the agency to continue supporting science-based research within its pesticide approval and review processes.

In recent months, heightened scrutiny of EPA-approved pesticides by several administration officials has

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raised concerns about how the products are viewed by regulators and the public. With the Make America Healthy Again Commission identifying American-grown produce as a key component of improving childhood health, we believe agriculture can continue to serve as a strong partner in achieving those goals through sound, science-based regulation. Staff contact: Matthew Viohl, mviohl@cfbf.com.

BLM, USDA Forest Service Announce 2026 Grazing Fees

Last week, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced updated grazing fees

for 2026. The new fee will be \$1.69 per animal unit month for lands administered by BLM and USDA. The updated rate takes effect March 1 and will apply to nearly 18,000 grazing permits and leases administered by BLM and approximately 5,550 permits administered by the U.S. Forest Service.

Staff contact: Erin Huston, ehuston@cfbf.com.

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