

People & Places

Advisor helps SJ Valley growers meet challenges

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

MERCED, Calif. — As early as the 1970s, Maxwell Norton envisioned the challenges and opportunities now confronting San Joaquin Valley growers.

The 61-year-old director of the University of California Cooperative Extension office here was one of the early pioneers in finding a way to measure soil moisture and salinity — now a key need as growers grapple with drought-related water shortages.

In the 1980s, he organized the first workshop on the potential for agricultural exports, which totaled \$21.2 billion in value statewide in 2013, according to the UC's Agricultural Issues Center.

He helped start the Merced County Farmland and Open Space Trust, which has been working for the past 10 years to prevent urban sprawl onto prime farmland.

Now Norton, who was set to retire July 1 but will continue part-time as an emeritus advisor, is putting his wide range of expertise to use to help the valley face its many challenges.

"I'm going to come in and still try and do a little bit of work in the tree fruit area," Norton said. "There are so few people who specialize in tree fruit. They've been doing a good job of hiring people to work in nut crops."

Raised on a farm near Salida, Calif., Norton said he started thinking about the valley's complicated future while earning a bachelor's degree in pomology at Fresno State University, where he also earned a master's in plant science.

"My professors at Fresno State often talked about how water issues will continue and be more and more of a problem for California agriculture," Norton said. "Something else they talked about, and this was back in the '70s ... was how salinity issues were going to become more and more



Photo courtesy of UCANR

Maxwell Norton, director of the University of California Cooperative Extension in Merced County, was a pioneer in research into water and soil conservation and farmland preservation. He was set to retire July 1 after 36 years, though he'll continue in an emeritus status.

of a problem throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

"They certainly were right," he said. "As we overdraft the groundwater, the quality of the groundwater is starting to deteriorate. I really fear for farmers in the worst areas. It's going to be tough going in the future."

Norton started his career with UCCE in 1979, specializing in helping growers solve problems in kiwifruit, Asian pears, prunes, peaches, strawberries, figs and pomegranates. At the time, UC scientists were just beginning to think about maximizing water-use efficiency, having been hit with a drought several years earlier.

Norton took a soil-moisture monitoring device called a neutron probe and tested it in peach orchards on clay-loam soils, attempting to correlate its readings with data from other devices such as tensionmeters and pressure chambers.

Today the UC has a formula by which growers can correlate their devices' readings with daily weather and climate

data to determine exactly how much water their trees need.

Over the years, Norton has worked on many projects to help peach and other fruit growers, including testing mating disruption for oriental fruit moth. He also helped develop such labor-saving practices as mechanical fruit and blossom thinning, according to a news release.

He delved into helping growers develop export markets when he saw local processors work through third-party export companies to send their products overseas. After his initial workshop on how producers and processors can get into the exporting business, the Merced County Economic Development Corp. started the first ag export assistance program, he said.

He chaired the county's economic development task force twice and served twice as president of the county's chamber of commerce.

"Now lots of agricultural products" are sent abroad, he said. "It's commonplace now for agricultural processors to do their own

marketing and exporting."

Norton has also organized forums and workshops on farmland presentation after noticing that the boundaries of Merced and other valley cities was pushing into prime farming areas.

In his work, Norton has become known for the kind and gentle way he exudes knowledge and wisdom, said Bill Martin, executive director of the Central Valley Farmland Trust. The trust was formed when the Merced County Farmland and Open Space Trust merged with two other valley land trusts.

"He has an understanding of the landscape that is greatly appreciated," Martin said in the UC release announcing Norton's retirement.

"I grew up in the Modesto area and I saw how rapidly cities in the northern San Joaquin Valley were growing and the declining farmland, and that bothered me," Norton told the Capital Press. "They were allowing urban growth ... when many times cities had the opportunity to direct growth onto marginal farmland."



Western Innovator Maxwell Norton

Age: 61

Occupation: University of California Cooperative Extension farm advisor

Residence: Atwater, Calif.

Family: Wife Diane Norton, adult children Linnea and Thys Norton

When he isn't working, Norton plans on playing the saxophone in jazz bands, teaching Master Gardener courses and volunteering for a local historical society. He still sees many challenges ahead for valley farmers.

"I think it's going to be very difficult to grow salt-sensitive crops in the San Joaquin Valley in many locations unless they can get surface water from reservoirs," he said. "Wherever they're having to irrigate with groundwater, it'll be increasingly difficult to grow tree fruit and maybe even grapes. We'll just have to see. ... There are very few tree fruit species that are moderately tolerant to salt."

But he also marvels at growers' resilience and the wide variety of crops still grown in the valley and in California as a whole — something he witnessed again while accompanying visiting farmers who were providing technical assistance, he said.

"Having the opportunity to drive all over the state and witness up close the immense diversity of agriculture, I'm still surprised at how different even the Sacramento Valley is from the San Joaquin Valley," he said. "Even after 36 years, I'm still running across stuff I've never seen. I don't know if it is possible to see it all."

Kids, cattle: Seeing the beauty in it all

By RYAN TAYLOR
For the Capital Press

TOWNER, N.D. — I'm not sure how many calves we've roped and branded in our neighborhood in the last month or so.

If I did know, I probably wouldn't say anyway. It's not polite to ask someone how many cattle they have, and I don't suppose it would be polite to tell anyone how many calves there are in the neighborhood in case they know how to do division.

It was quite a bunch anyway.

A lot of people would say it's the best time of the year on our part of the prairie. It's usually our best weather of the year. The skies are blue, the grass is green. It's easily our most social time of the year. People, pickups,

Cowboy Logic

Ryan Taylor



horse trailers, kids, horses and food all descend on a place like a cowboy sting operation.

The keys to enjoying the calf working season are kind of natural and obvious. You have to like cattle, horses, neighbors, kids, food and conversation. Cattle are cattle, sometimes they do exactly what you want, other times, maybe not. You have to roll with it without losing your cool. Horses are easily the best tool around for gently and expertly roping the two hind legs of the calves to bring them to the calf working crew, but again, you have to respect them for their mind and the constant

cues and teaching a rider gives a horse in a new setting. They're not machines, but they can get a little better, and more valuable, with each ride and each calf pulled from the pen. Apart from those animal components, it's up to us humans to allow ourselves to enjoy the company of neighbors and kids, and the satisfaction of good food and conversation.

I remember a story our friend and minister shared at my father's funeral. Wally was helping Dad work a handful of older cattle through the chute on a hot day, and Wally offered to round up his kids and my sister and me from the yard to come help, and Dad said, "No, just let them play. They've got their whole life to work, let them play." And we continued to run around the yard, climb trees and swing on

the swing set.

Later, Wally and Dad sat down on the ground with their backs against the barn wall to rest and maybe have something cool to drink. They were sitting there watching us kids run and play, and Wally said Dad's gaze landed on us and he softly said, "Aren't they beautiful?"

It was one of those tender admissions of a father, and what I believe every father thinks to himself when he looks at his children. But, not to let the emotion of the moment get out of hand, he followed up a little later with, "how'd a couple of ugly so-and-so's like us get so lucky as to have kids like that?"

I think of that story often when I look at my own children. Of course, I know that I can thank my wife and the genetic process for the beauty of our

kids. And I thank the life I've been given to have had my father's love, that story, and to be able to share that same fatherly love with our own kids who run and play, and work calves.

At the end of the calf working on our place, I appreciated the comments of "Your calves looked really good, Ryan," or, "Boy, the cows were sure slicked off nice and in good shape." It was a nice sight to see so many good horses tied along the corral. The food and drinks were good and plentiful, and our friends and neighbors were in good spirits. But nothing beat seeing a yard full of kids, sometimes helping us in the branding corral, sometimes just running and playing and laughing like kids ought to.

Dad was right. They are beautiful.

New Washington dairy ambassador selected

Nicole Buell of Snohomish County has been selected the 2015-2016 Washington State Dairy Ambassador.

She was one of eight finalists at the 60th Annual Washington State Dairy Ambassador contest "Diamonds and Tiaras" held in the Grand Ballroom of the Holiday Inn, in Everett, Wash.

Amanda Howe of Lynden, representing Whatcom County, and Lydia Johnson of Ethel, representing Lewis County, were selected as alternate ambassadors, according to a press release from the Dairy Farmers of Washington.

As a representative of the Dairy Farmers of Washington, the State Dairy Ambassador and Alternates will visit schools, attend county fairs, appear at Washington Interscholastic Activities Association events and speak before the Washington state legislature promoting the health and nutrition benefits of dairy products.

A dairy ambassador typically makes over 400 public appearances during her year-long tenure. On completion of their reign, Buell, from Marysville, and her alternate ambassadors will receive scholarships to continue

their educations.

The dairy industry was represented by 2014-2015 Washington State Dairy Ambassador Janis DeJager of Everson and Alternate State Dairy Ambassadors Marissa Apperson of Rochester and Marcella Bartelheimer of Snohomish. They traveled the state educating students, parents and others on the positive impact and value of Washington's dairy industry.

The other 2015 finalists were:

- Skagit County: Katie Jo Conley of Mount Vernon.
- Inland Northwest: Ashley Rochlitzer of Spokane.



Courtesy Washington State Dairy Women

From left to right are Amanda Howe, the 2015-16 Alternate Ambassador; Nicole Buell, the 2015-16 Washington State Dairy Ambassador; and Lydia Johnson, the 2015-16 Alternate Ambassador.

- Snohomish County: Olivia Russell of Stanwood.
- Whatcom County: Ellie Steensma of Lynden.
- Skagit County: Megan

Sybrandy of Mount Vernon. Administered by the Washington State Dairy Women, the dairy ambassador program began in 1955.

Calendar

Wednesday, July 8

Introduction to Pacific Northwest Agroforestry Practices, 9 a.m.-3 p.m., Willow Lake Wastewater Treatment Plant, Salem, Ore., 503-391-9927. The workshop will focus on integrating trees and shrubs into an agricultural land-use system to enhance productivity, profitability and environmental stewardship. Presentations

will examine hedgerows and windbreaks, landscape ecology and agriculture, an introduction to alley cropping, riparian buffers and wildlife habitat and agriculture. RSVP.

OSU Blueberry Field Day, 1-5 p.m., Oregon State University North Willamette Research and Extension Center, Aurora, Ore., 971-373-5912.

Friday, July 10

Forestry Shortcourse, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., West Bonner Library, Priest River, Idaho, 208-446-1680. This 6-session program will help forest owners understand ecology, silviculture, wildlife and other topics.

Saturday, July 18

Washington State Sheep Producers Ram and Ewe Sale,

11:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Grant County Fairgrounds, Moses Lake, Wash.

Tuesday, Aug. 4

Spotted Wing Drosophila Workshop, 9 a.m.-1 p.m., Eugene Unitarian Universalist Church, Eugene, 208-850-6504. Topics include understanding SWD biology, behavior and seasonal needs; SWD management tools and practices; monitoring; identification; and fruit sampling demonstrations.

Saturday and Sunday, Aug. 15-16

Harvest Fest, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Yamhill Valley Heritage Center Museum, McMinnville, Ore., 503-434-0490. Tractor parade, threshing, binding and baling oats using antique farming equipment and horses. Pioneer kids area, agricultural displays, music, food and fun.

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Index

Dairy 11
Drought 4
Markets 14
Opinion 6

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