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California

Fair attractions teach kids, parents about agriculture

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

RED BLUFF, Calif. — Tammie Ryan has been doing themed attractions and entertainment at local fairs for 25 years, but recently she started getting requests from fairgoers.

“People asked us to do an ag-related one,” said Ryan, who co-owns The Source Management Group in Powell Butte, Ore.

So she and her business partner, Patrick Wood, introduced Barnyard Adventure, where youngsters can milk a fiberglass cow, dig for potatoes and carrots, play with toy farm equipment in a pool of corn and do commodity-related puzzles.

The barnyard area was featured at 12 local fairs this year, including Red Bluff’s Tehama District Fair on Sept. 24-27. The company provides attractions for about 25 fairs a year overall.

“So many kids don’t know where their food comes from,” Ryan said. “They just think you go to a grocery store. It is amazing how many kids ask if that’s real corn, and how many just love to play in the dirt.”

More and more, agriculture-related games, entertainment and play areas are becoming popular fixtures at local fairs, operating in tandem with their livestock exhibits and student farms.

Several years ago, the California State Fair in Sacramento moved its live birthing demonstrations and put in Ag-Ventureland, which includes an area for roping a “steer,” a place to try on farm clothes and other hands-on activities to teach kids about what life is like on the farm.

Ag-Ventureland is the creation of the Medford, Ore.-based Great American Animal Entertainment Co., which puts on pony rides, petting zoos, trail rides for children and a



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Becky Goodyear of Anaheim, Calif., is dressed up as her character, Sadie, as she prepares her animatronic puppet, Virgil McDonald, for a children’s show about agriculture Sept. 25 at the Tehama District Fair in Red Bluff, Calif.

“cowboy boot camp” for fairs and other events around the country.

“Fairs are realizing more and more the need to educate kids about agriculture,” said Becky Goodyear of Anaheim, Calif., who offers an ag-themed puppet show and balloon artistry at local fairs.

Raised in rural Michigan, Goodyear has been performing at fairs since 2000. About three years ago she created Sadie’s Farmtastic Adventure, for which she wears a costume and works with an animatronic puppet she calls Virgil McDonald.

“So he is actually Old McDonald,” said Goodyear, who was also at last weekend’s Tehama District Fair.

“It’s a fun way to learn a little bit about agriculture,” she said. “I try to use fun and silly and sneak in some education without them knowing it.”

Goodyear’s routine includes some music and comedy as well as audience participation, and there’s a moral message at the end.

“We sort of morph into character-building — what you sow is what you reap,” she said. “If you plant corn, you’re not going to get pumpkins.”

At Ryan’s Barnyard Adventures, signs give fun facts about different commodities. For instance, one cowhide can be used to make 144 baseballs, 20 footballs, 18 soccer balls, 18 volleyballs or 12 basketballs, one sign reads.

New plant-stress sensor further aids irrigation efficiency

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

DAVIS, Calif. — New technology developed at the university here promises to further enhance growers’ ability to irrigate only when and where the water is needed.

A suite of sensors developed by University of California-Davis researchers delivers real-time plant-stress data to a grower’s computer or smart phone, saving him or her from having to walk through fields to look for signs of stress, the researchers say.

The device, which is now being marketed by Milpitas, Calif.-based Cermetek Microelectronics under the LeafMon brand name, has been rolled out first for vineyards and almond and walnut orchards with a goal of improving crop quality and yields. Researchers are now testing the device’s effectiveness on other crops.

The technology “is giving growers a convenient way to irrigate crops the right amount in the right place at the right time,” UC-Davis spokeswoman Diane Nelson said in an email.

The new device comes as nearly 90 percent of tree nut growers in the northern Sacramento Valley have converted to drip irrigation and micro-sprinklers to save water, according to Allan Fulton, a UC Cooperative Extension farm adviser in Red Bluff who specializes in irrigation.

The extension has made irrigation efficiency a key focus in recent years, training farmers in irrigation scheduling, deficit irrigation and how to interpret readings from pressure bombs to determine how much water their trees need.

Even before the four-year



Courtesy of UCANR

The LeafMon plant-stress monitoring device promises to further enhance growers’ irrigation efficiency.

drought, UCCE advisers were urging growers to set up irrigation schedules with the use of such testing equipment as pressure bombs, which are sort of like blood pressure tests for trees. UC-Davis’ Fruit and Nut Center launched a website last year to help growers interpret their readings from pressure bombs.

Growers also make use of soil sensors that help them water only when their soil is dry, but those readings may be misleading, UC researchers say. Dry soil doesn’t always indicate that a plant is suffering, just as moist soil doesn’t always mean a plant is getting water at its deepest roots.

The LeafMon device designed by UC-Davis biological and agricultural engineering professor Shrinivasa Upadhyaya and his team attaches to a single, shaded leaf and measures leaf temperature, light, wind speed, relative humidity and air temperature — all of which affect a plant’s water needs, a news release explains.

Luis Sanchez, a senior research scientist for E and J Gallo Winery in Modesto, Calif., believes the sensor could work well with other high-tech irrigation scheduling methods.

“It could be a very useful tool for verifying our satellite-based irrigation schedules,” Sanchez said in the release.

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