

New ag college dean aggressively reaches out to Idaho industry

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — Three weeks into his new job as dean of the University of Idaho's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, Michael Parrella is reaching out to the state's agricultural leaders and other CALS stakeholders.

Response to Parrella's quick and aggressive outreach efforts has been positive.

"We're excited. He's reaching out to us in that spirit of collaboration and we have a lot of hope for CALS," said Idaho Cattle Association Executive Vice President Wyatt Prescott.

Parrella told Food Producers of Idaho members Feb. 17 that he wants to get to know stakeholders and other CALS supporters and learn from them.



Sean Ellis/Capital Press
Michael Parrella, the new dean of University of Idaho's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, meets Food Producers of Idaho members Feb. 17 during the group's weekly meeting.

"I'm really here to listen," he said. "There is a lot to learn and a lot of people to get to know. We all want the same thing; we want CALS to be

great. The dean can't do it alone. We need to work together to make that happen."

During the meeting, Parrella was told that the process

the college goes through to make decisions is sometimes challenging and he was asked if it was possible to change that.

"We do have a president and a provost ... that have an understanding and appreciation for agriculture in the state and that's not a trivial thing," he said. "There's no reason not to be optimistic that we can eliminate some of those (challenges)."

The new CALS dean also received a favorable reception from Idaho lawmakers when he was introduced during the House Agricultural Affairs Committee meeting Feb. 18.

"We're very anxious to work with you and we're looking forward to it," said the committee chairman, Rep. Ken Andrus, a Republican rancher from Lava Hot Springs.

Parrella was introduced to the committee by Idaho Grain Producers Association Governmental Affairs Director Rich Garber, who recently retired from CALS.

"I believe (CALS) is the most important college at the University of Idaho and I also believe the dean of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences is the most important dean at the university," Garber said.

Parrella served as chair of the University of California-Davis Department of Entomology and Nematology. His master's degree and doctorate are in entomology from Virginia Tech.

His research has focused on the development of integrated pest management programs for greenhouse and nursery crops.

Parrella attended the Idaho

Barley Commission's annual research proposal review Feb. 18 and heard an hour-long presentation from four CALS researchers who are based off-campus in Southern Idaho.

"It was a great opportunity for him to interact with barley stakeholders and see his own faculty in action," said IBC Administrator Kelly Olson.

Prescott told the Capital Press he hopes animal agriculture, which accounts for 60 percent of total farm-gate receipts in Idaho, sees its fair share of attention at CALS and Parrella strongly hinted it would while addressing House ag committee members.

"I recognize the importance of the dairy and livestock industries in the state of Idaho," he said. "I certainly intend to be actively engaged" with them.



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group
Chicken farmer Mahlon Zehr holds one of the 30,000 Lohmann Brown chicken hens he has at his egg production facility outside Milton-Freewater, Ore.

Eastern Oregon farmer takes on 30,000 cage-free chickens

By GEORGE PLAVEN
EO Media Group

MILTON-FREEWATER, Ore. — Mahlon Zehr walks carefully down the middle row of his cage-free hen house, clapping his hands to scatter the flock of chickens that gather close around his feet.

"They're very curious," Zehr said. "If you're working in here, they'll come right up pecking at your hands and pecking at your shoes."

For Zehr, the chickens came first — all 30,000 of them — and the eggs won't be far behind. Zehr signed a 10-year contract last July to raise commercial eggs for Wilcox Family Farms of Roy, Washington, and has built a production facility at his home near Milton-Freewater.

The chickens arrived on trucks earlier this month, and Zehr said they should start laying eggs in the next week or two. He expects to raise 8.5 million eggs over the course of the year.

"It should be pretty busy here in the next couple weeks," he said.

At 20,000 square feet, the hen house is longer than a football field and divided into three main rows where the birds are free to wander and roost. By summer, Zehr plans to turn the chickens out onto pasture, but for now he keeps them inside over concerns of avian flu.

An avian flu outbreak affected two backyard poultry flocks around the Tri-Cities early last year. If just one of his chickens gets sick, Zehr said the entire flock would be euthanized and that would put him out of business for at least six months, and possibly a year.

In the meantime, Zehr said he will build a meshed-in porch where the hens can go outside for some fresh air, while protecting them from other wild birds. The operation is cage-free, which Zehr said is becoming increasingly important for consumers.

"The cage-free market is growing," he said. "It's what people want."

Wilcox Farms owns all the chickens and provides the feed, though Zehr has already invested \$1.2 million on new equipment and labor. Nearly all the technology is automated, from the ceiling lights to the conveyor belts where eggs are carried off and sorted into trays.

"It's automated enough to where I should be able to handle it myself," Zehr said.

When the chickens are ready to lay eggs, they will head into one of many nesting boxes layered up and down each row. The eggs drop gently onto conveyors, which twist their way to the front of the barn. A separate line of conveyors also sweeps feathers and droppings into a nearby shed.

Zehr plans to sell the manure as fertilizer for organic farms and gardens. As for the eggs, Wilcox Farms pays by the dozen and sells at grocery stores across the Northwest.

"It's a fairly stable investment," Zehr said. "It'll provide a good living for us."

Zehr, who grew up in the Willamette Valley, moved to Milton-Freewater in 2008 to help start Blue Mountain Christian Fellowship, a Mennonite church where he serves as co-pastor.

Two years ago, he sold his flooring and carpet business in town to buy 40 acres along Edwards Road, about halfway to Umapine.

As a child, Zehr lived on a small farm where his father bought and sold grass seed. Zehr said he is excited to return to his agricultural roots, and jumped at the opportunity to raise eggs.

"It's a stay-at-home job. I'm working in my own backyard," he said. "It's a very family-friendly business."

Zehr said he's been working 14-15 hour days and walking 6-8 miles up and down the hen house getting everything ready for production. He'll have this flock of hens for about 14-15 months, until they're replaced by another shipment from Wilcox.

Chico State ag career fair broadens students' horizons

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

CHICO, Calif. — Agricultural students at California State University-Chico are broadening their horizons and realizing their career opportunities could extend well beyond the farm.

At the university's annual career fair Feb. 17 at its farm, ag students met with representatives from a seafood processor, a food distribution center and even from BrightView, a national landscaping firm.

And why would a landscaping company be attracted to ag students?

"There's always a need for good people with agronomy and soil science experience," said Matt Trenary, a BrightView representative.

For the Renaissance Food Group, a food distribution company that places salads, wraps and other items in retail stores, mining the ag colleges could provide people familiar with the production end of the food system.

"Ag students tend to have a passion for our industry," company human resources director Jennifer Angle said. "It's very fitting."

The landscaping and food distribution booths were part of the expanded offerings at this year's 13th annual career and internship fair, held in the pavilion at the university's farm.

The fair is held each year for ag students at Chico State, Butte College in Chico and Shasta College in Redding.

The event was started as a way to give students access to companies specific to ag, while the job fairs on the main campus mostly cater to other occupations. This year, 48 companies set up booths, well above last year's all-time high of 38.

"We've tried to bring in more animal science companies," said event organizer Melissa Taylor, noting that a growing number of Chico State's students — about 400 — are focusing on that discipline.

"Before I even sent out invitations, I had companies calling me and asking when they could sign up," she said.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press
Ellen Troudy, center, a live production supervisor for Foster Farms, talks to a student during the annual agricultural career fair Feb. 17 at the California State University-Chico farm. This year's fair had more vendors than ever before.

A fixture at the career fair has been Foster Farms, which has hired many Chico State alumni. Ryan Scagliotti, a live production supervisor for the company, earned an agricultural business degree from Chico State in 2014 and now oversees eight ranches with about 2 million chickens, he said.

"It's a really good tool for the company to get really high-quality candidates," Scagliotti said of the career fair. Foster Farms representatives attend similar fairs at California Polytechnic University-San Luis Obispo and California State University-Fresno.

"I was very persistent on career fairs" as a student, Scagliotti said. "I transferred here as a junior and started going

to career fairs just to see what was going on with internships. By my senior year I went to every career fair on campus."

But this year, booths such as BrightView's let students see the opportunities that come with an agriculture degree that perhaps they hadn't considered. One student who visited with Trenary was Carson Diccico, a senior and crop

science major at Chico State.

"It was definitely an eye-opener," he said.

Diccico sees a great benefit from attending the career fairs, he said.

"It's been a great opportunity," he said. "I had a couple of employers give me job offers (last year). It was great summer experience and I got credit for internships."