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# California

## 4-H, FFA members gear up for state fair

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — 4-H and FFA members throughout the Golden State are gearing up to face big-league competition at the California State Fair on July 14-30.

Entrants at the Sacramento County Fair over the Memorial Day weekend were offered the added benefit of doing a dry run at the facility where the state fair is held — Cal Expo.

FFA member Joshua Vargas of Elk Grove, Calif., said he knew of a few students at the county event who planned to go on to the state fair. For them, the competitions at the smaller gathering were an opportunity to know where to improve.

“The judges will tell you what to work on and what they want to see more of,” he said.

More than 4,000 animals are entered in youth and local divisions at the state fair each year. Exhibits in the fair’s livestock building and adjacent shaded stalls are shown in



FFA members Joshua Vargas, left, and Mariah McBride of Elk Grove, the Sacramento County Fair at the Cal Expo fairgrounds in late May.

shifts, and the fair offers showmanship awards and prizes in different classes for youths. Agriculture will again take

center stage at the 164th state fair, whose theme this year is “Come One, Come All!” One of the most popular

destinations for attendees is the 34-year-old farm, where a local chef will offer cooking demonstrations with locally



Hanna Parker of Liberty Ranch FFA in Galt, Calif., walks with her pig at the Sacramento County Fair at the Cal Expo fairgrounds in late May. The fairgrounds will host the California State Fair July 14-30.

grown produce. Other farm features will include a daily farmers’ market, an aquaculture exhibit, a hydroponic greenhouse and an insect pavilion.

In addition, an exhibit called Farmacy Follies will feature goats, sheep, llamas and a spotted donkey from the Great American Petting Zoo, offering fairgoers a chance to

learn about animals and see them up close.

Fair-related festivities kicked off June 22 with the State Fair Gala at Cal Expo, which raises funds for the Friends of the California State Fair Student Scholarship Fund.

Fair officials presented this year’s Agriculturalist of the Year award to Tom Nassif, chief executive officer of Western Growers, for highlighting the need for immigration reform and pushing for a new specialty-crop title in the Farm Bill.

Among other ag-related honorees, Paul Draper of the Cupertino-based Ridge Vineyards received the Wine Lifetime Achievement Award and Dutton Ranch Vineyards in Sebastopol received the Vineyard of the Year Award.

That morning, fair chief executive officer Rick Pickering and local dignitaries honored the Best of Show winners for the Commercial Wine, Cheese, Extra Virgin Olive Oil and Commercial Beer competition in front of the state Capitol.

## Clean Water Act case set for trial

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press



Courtesy Pacific Legal Foundation

Pacific Legal Foundation attorney Tony Francois, left, stands with John Duarte, president of Duarte Nursery. A federal lawsuit to enforce \$2.8 million in fines imposed on Duarte for work he did in a wheat field in Tehama County, Calif., is set to go to trial in August.

officials did not immediately respond to Capital Press requests for comment.

The talks come as Duarte has asked Mueller to reconsider her ruling last year that he should have obtained a Clean Water Act permit to run shanks through wetlands at a depth of 4 to 6 inches, creating furrows before planting wheat in a 450-acre pasture.

Because the judge hasn’t yet determined a penalty for Duarte, the litigation isn’t finished, so he couldn’t appeal to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals without her permission.

Duarte maintains he hired a consultant in 2012 to identify wetlands on the property off Paskenta Road south of Red Bluff and that no plowing took place in those areas.

The PLF contends that areas where plowing occurred do not meet tests the U.S. Supreme Court has set for wetlands subject to Clean Water Act oversight. Francois has argued the Corps relied on a wetlands map created in 1994, when the legal definition of a wetland was much more widely applied.

As a result of the order to stop, Duarte Nursery lost the \$50,000 it cost to plant the wheat and has lost the

ability to farm the property, Francois said. The PLF filed suit on Duarte’s behalf in 2013, disputing the Corps’ allegations and arguing the government violated the business’ due-process right in not allowing it to answer the charge. The Corps responded with a counterclaim alleging the Clean Water Act violation.

The PLF’s hopes for a resolution were raised in February, when Trump issued an executive order directing the EPA to review the “Waters of the United States” rule. The rule was withdrawn this week.

As it now stands, in addition to the \$2.8 million in fines, the government wants Duarte to purchase up to 132 acres of wetland mitigation credits, which could cost tens of millions of dollars, he said.

“One of the things the government said ... is the reason they want mitigation credits is that’s what the Corps of Engineers would require any farmer to get as part of a permit to plow their property,” the attorney said. “That’s just a complete misreading of the Clean Water Act.

“We do think it would be a wise move for the administration to look at the legal issues and the facts of this case.”

## Director who led water agency through dam crisis set to retire

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Bill Croyle, who as acting director shepherded the state Department of Water Resources through the near-failure of the Oroville Dam last winter, is retiring effective July 1, the agency announced.

“I’m very proud of the work we have accomplished over the years bringing California through drought, flood and most recently, through the Oroville Spillway incident,” Croyle, 59, said in a statement. “And now I’m looking forward to picking up my retirement plans where they left off six months ago.”

A former chief of flood operations and drought emergency operations manager for the DWR, Croyle put off his retirement at Gov. Jerry Brown’s request to take the reins in January from retiring director Mark Cowin.

In February, spillway rup-

tures at the Oroville Dam led to the two-day evacuation of about 188,000 area residents and threatened a large portion of the Eastern Sacramento Valley’s \$1.5 billion agricultural industry, including rice and tree crops and several processors along the Highway 99 corridor between Chico and Yuba City.

As it was, some fruit and nut orchards planted inside levees were flooded as Feather River waters rose, and fluctuations in water levels as officials closed and reopened the Oroville Dam’s spillway caused erosion that led to the flooding of orchards outside the levees.

In April, the DWR awarded a \$275.4 million contract to the Omaha, Neb.-based Kiewit Infrastructure West Co. for permanent repair work on the Oroville Dam’s spillways, which is expected to continue through the summer.

Amid the crisis, Croyle sometimes faced criticism, as when the agency initially rebuffed the Sacramento Bee in its effort to gain access to records the newspaper argued would show how Brown’s office handled the crisis. Croyle later said the state would release some records.

Farm groups, meanwhile, criticized the DWR for being slow in increasing State Water Project allocations despite record precipitation in many areas last winter. Lake Oroville is the SWP’s chief reservoir.

“California is extremely fortunate to have had Bill at the helm of DWR this year, especially during the Oroville emergency,” state Natural Resources Agency secretary John Laird.

Cindy Messer, the DWR’s chief deputy director, will serve as acting director until a new director is appointed.

## As competition grows, California prunes seek to fill high-end niche

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — As the global prune market becomes more competitive, the California Dried Plum Board plans to target higher-end consumers who are willing to pay more for better quality.

The industry’s strategy will be to highlight prunes’ use as a value-added ingredient in culinary circles and pitch California prunes as a more nutritious alternative in nations with stronger economies, said Donn Zea, the board’s executive director.

“It’s a great thing to be able to grow and process the world’s greatest fruit,” Zea said. “We’re in search of markets that are consistently willing and able to pay for those.”

One of those key markets is Japan, where the plum board is stepping up its promotional efforts in the run-up to the 2020

summer Olympics in Tokyo.

The number of foreign visitors to Japan has been increasing at a rapid rate, reaching 24 million in 2016, and restaurants are scrambling to meet their special dietary needs, Rachel Nelson, director of the U.S. Agricultural Trade Office in Tokyo, said in a recent report.

California prunes are recommended as an ingredient for special menus in a guidebook that Nelson presented to more than 250 Japanese food and hospitality professionals at a recent seminar. The board is also using sports dietitians to tout prunes’ nutritional value to athletes training for the 2020 games.

The efforts come as the global marketplace has been flooded with smaller, cheaper prunes from Chile and Argentina, which has put downward pressure on prices.

Last year’s weather-affect-

ed short crop further eroded California’s share of the market. Shipments of the 2016 crop to overseas destinations are down 26 percent from 2015, while domestic shipments have risen 4 percent, Zea said.

The shortage prompted some handlers in the Golden State to obtain foreign prunes to send to trading customers to meet their orders, Zea said.

While industry leaders won’t say they’re willing to cede markets to competitors, they note it’s difficult to compete head-to-head with the cheaper prunes.

For instance, while the European Union remains California prunes’ largest export market, valued at nearly \$60 million in 2015-16, the fruit faces a nearly 10 percent tariff from which Chilean prunes are exempt as well as competitive challenges from a strong dollar, leaders say.

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