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California

Ross: Ag should focus on workforce

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

ORLAND, Calif. — As farm labor shortages persist, California's top agriculture official says policymakers and California growers should take more steps to shore up the agricultural workforce.

While noting that many public and private investments have been made in technology, state Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross believes spending should be increased for recruiting and training new workers, she told a conference on Nov. 8.

For instance, the community college system could be useful in "training up the existing workforce" in new skills, Ross said during the second annual North State Innovations in Agriculture conference at the Glenn County Fairgrounds.

But while labor, regulations and other issues present a challenge for California agriculture, Ross said she still believes the industry can remain successful.

"I am very optimistic about the future of California agriculture," she said. "What we grow is in demand. There's no doubt we have a lot of work to do to convince young people about all the career opportunities in agriculture. We have to make agriculture cool."

Ross addressed the state's labor challenges amid a wide-ranging question-and-answer session with roughly 75 attendees of the conference, which was started last year to educate Northern California growers about technological advancements in the industry.

The secretary took several questions related to labor as a California Farm Bureau Fed-



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

California Secretary of Food and Agriculture Karen Ross, left, talks with Ryann Newman, manager of the Glenn County Fairgrounds, before speaking at the second annual North State Innovations in Agriculture conference Nov. 8 in Orland, Calif.

eration survey this summer found that 55 percent of the 762 respondents had employee shortages and 69 percent of farmers who hired seasonal workers faced shortages.

Problems are more acute among farmers whose crops require the most intensive hand labor such as tree fruit and grapes, the survey found. The findings were consistent with those of a similar survey conducted by the Farm Bureau in 2012.

"I'm not really optimistic" about the foreign labor picture improving, Ross told her audience. She said the industry will need to get creative to bring new people in, such as employers offering more internships and apprenticeships to train younger workers.

She noted the rising popularity of university agriculture programs such as the one at California State University-Chico, whose enrollment has more than doubled in the last decade. Chico State offers four undergraduate degrees and an online master's degree and includes the 800-acre university farm, which

employs a manager and 15 full-time employees and has up to 40 student workers.

"It's bursting at the seams," Ross said.

On other issues: • Asked what the CDFA could do to ease the regulatory burden on farmers, Ross said she works with agencies such as the State Water Resources Control Board and Department of Fish and Wildlife to bring an agricultural perspective early in the process as the agencies draft new rules.

"One of the things we've done is create a position to interact with other agencies" as a liaison, she said.

However, "I will tell you that the continued push on water quality is not going to ease," she said. The state water board has placed more scrutiny on nitrates in groundwater in recent years as a University of California-Davis study in 2012 found that nitrate contamination in drinking water was a pervasive problem.

Ross said the scrutiny will persist as long as the state must keep trucking in fresh

water to some rural communities whose groundwater is too contaminated to drink.

• Ross said the legalization of non-medical uses of cannabis beginning Jan. 1 likely won't eliminate the illicit pot market. She said there is "very big money" being invested in sophisticated indoor growing operations in urban areas, but the permits and requirements to sell pot legally may be cost-prohibitive to small growers.

"It's going to be difficult for that third-generation grower on the north coast who wants to come out from the shadows," Ross said.

The CDFA and four other agencies are tasked with licensing and regulating marijuana, with the group's \$57.2 million budget funded by cultivation taxes and license fees. The CDFA's role will include issuing the licenses and developing a program to track the movement of medical marijuana through the distribution chain.

• Ross told the Capital Press she hasn't heard complaints from growers over the state gasoline and diesel tax increases that took effect Nov. 1, although farm groups opposed the increases.

Lawmakers last spring approved a \$5 billion-a-year plan to fund major road repairs, which will increase vehicle registration fees while raising gas taxes by 12 cents a gallon and increasing diesel sales taxes from 16 cents to 36 cents per gallon.

Western Growers president and chief executive officer Tom Nassif argued in April the tax increases will add to the "staggering regulatory burdens and costs placed on California farmers" that "have already placed our industry at a competitive disadvantage relative to other states" and countries.



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

From left, Ignio Cafiero of Bear Flag Robotics, Eyal Amit of FieldIn Technologies, Jason Schwenkler of California State University-Chico, Bill Moffitt of Ayrstone Productivity and Dennis Donohue of Western Growers take part in a panel discussion on agriculture-related start-up businesses Nov. 7 at the Glenn County Fairgrounds in Orland, Calif.

Finding, filling needs vital for ag start-ups

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

ORLAND, Calif. — None of them grew up on a farm, but five entrepreneurs are providing crucial services to growers across the country.

One has found a way to provide wireless connectivity to rural farms. Another is developing self-driving retrofit kits for tractors. Others help farms manage data and control pests.

Their advice to would-be start-ups: Find a need that isn't being met and meet it.

"I think the farm of the future is clearly going to have more information derived from data to help make decisions," said Brandt Bereton of the Salinas, Calif.-based Tailwater Systems, which developed a compact system to take nitrogen out of water.

Tailwater is one of the start-ups that received help from the Western Growers Center for Innovation and Technology, which opened in Salinas two years ago to provide work space and other resources for entrepreneurs in agriculture-related fields.

Western Growers, which assists and advocates for

produce growers in California and Arizona, received a \$30,000 grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation in 2016 to operate the center. Its amenities have helped entrepreneurs develop products and services that help growers save water or labor, compile and use crop data and meet other needs.

The center offers basic office amenities such as a desk, phone and internet access as well as the ability to network with other companies and collaborate on projects. When choosing start-ups for the center, Western Growers looks for companies developing solutions related to food safety, automation and water management.

The center's work comes as the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources and a nonprofit organization recently won a \$500,000 grant to develop a separate network for agricultural entrepreneurs.

The money will go toward cultivating the Verde Innovation Network for Entrepreneurs, which will link businesses with mentors, advisers, collaborators, events, competitions and other services.

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Greenhand Conferences Introduce Students To FFA Experience

School is back in session, and students are once again roaming the halls of their hometown schools. For those who are in FFA, this means that it is time once again for the Oregon FFA Greenhand Conferences to get underway. Each year, the Oregon FFA Association facilitates 4-6 Greenhand Conferences held throughout the state.

These conferences give first year FFA students the opportunity to dive deeper into the organization and discover all that it has to offer. It often becomes a student's introduction to their potential in FFA and agriculture education. The sole purpose of the Greenhand Conferences is to welcome new students and present the core fundamentals of the organization. There are three major components that make up the foundation of the program. In what is called the three circle model, Supervised Agricultural Experiences, the Classroom, and FFA all play equal parts in the continual operation of this student-led organization. Without each one, the FFA would not be what it is today. At the conferences, facilitators work to create an atmosphere of excitement, community and learning as the students navigate their way through the three circle model and begin to grasp the depth of agriculture education. They are able to ask questions, be curious, and continually broaden their knowledge of their place in this nationwide program.

Facilitator Sarah Rutledge shared that her favorite part of the Greenhand Conferences is "watching the students start the conference timid and shy, then get excited and overjoyed about getting involved in FFA by the end." Having been introduced only a few short years ago, the Greenhand Conferences continue to grow, both in participation and curriculum. Past State President Shea Booster shared that "An effective conference sets the hook for members. They are then reeled in over the next four years through other conferences, events and experiences in the agriculture industry." The organization makes it a priority that these students are able to pour their passion into their FFA experience. Each person has their own FFA story that is shaped and molded by the events they participate in. Greenhand conferences are only the beginning of a life-changing experience for students who choose to travel the agriculture education path.

Students take part in a Greenhand Conference, where they learn about all that FFA has to offer them.

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