

People & Places

‘Avocado Man’ faces foreign competition

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

SANTA PAULA, Calif. — Organic avocado and citrus grower Will Brokaw says he is glad to see 2020 gone, but concerns remain.

“The biggest challenge for me and other fruit growers is foreign competition that is driving prices down,” he said. “Up until the early 1990s, domestic avocado production enjoyed complete protection from foreign imports. Now different countries have been allowed to start exporting avocados into all 50 states. First was Chile, then the super-behemoth Mexico and then Peru.”

Previously, California avocados were regularly exported throughout the world, but now Mexico provides 90% of the domestic supply.

Brokaw’s parents, Hank and Ellen Brokaw, started the 200-acre ranch in 1967. About 150 acres are devoted to avocados and the rest grow a wide variety of specialty fruits.

Most of the avocados and specialty fruit are sold in the commercial market, in direct competition with imports, and at farmers markets.

While it’s true that there are a lot more avocado eaters today in the world, Brokaw said the scary thing is that there are vast acres of newly planted avocado groves in Central and South



Gary Yost/CUESA

Will Brokaw, co-owner of Brokaw Ranch in California’s Ventura County, grows 150 acres of avocados in addition to other fruits.

America that haven’t even started producing.

According to Lulu Meyer, CUESA’s director of operations, Brokaw Ranch has had its fair share of difficulties over the past few years. In addition to the flood of overseas competition, wildfires ravaged much of their orchards in 2017, forcing them to replant.

CUESA operates the farmers market at the San Francisco ferry terminal, one of several Brokaw frequents.

Then the global pandemic hit in 2020 and many restaurants were shut down, causing a tremendous loss of sales for farms like Brokaw Ranch.

Brokaw used the pan-

demic as an opportunity to innovate. He changed his approach to direct consumer sales and began offering a more full-service retail experience, with pre-packed boxes.

Consumers can order the boxes, which cost \$30 to \$40 and include assortments of avocados and fruits. They can pick up the boxes at the farmers market of their choice.

Brokaw says the sloping land and ridge tops on the ranch are perfect for his crops.

The “fruit bowl” of crops grown there include avocados, cherimoyas (the hardest to grow), feijoas (also called pineapple guava), grape-

fruit, guava, kiwis, kumquats, lemons, limes, lychee (the most unusual), mandarins, mangoes, oranges and pomelos.

Avocados weren’t always well-known in the U.S. It wasn’t easy selling consumers on the exotic fruit. The first railcar of California avocados was shipped to New York in January of 1927. The reception was less than enthusiastic. A sales report stated, “The Eastern market doesn’t want black fruit.”

Today, Brokaw’s avocados and other specialty fruits are popular with the crowds at farmers markets in Santa Cruz, Berkeley and San Francisco.



**Western
Innovator**

WILL BROKAW

Hometown: Santa Paula, Calif.

Occupation: Fruit grower, manages all farmers market and direct restaurant sales.

Quote: “Brokaw Ranch is a multi-generational agricultural family business that honors the legacy of its founders, Hank and Ellen Brokaw, by achieving excellence and success with innovation, integrity and leadership, including social and environmental stewardship.”

“Brokaw Ranch has been a staple at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market for almost three decades, and while they may be most famous for their avocados, they also have a cult following for their subtropical and citrus varieties,” Meyer said. “Will Brokaw, or the ‘Avocado Man’ as so many shoppers refer to him, is the face of the ranch at our markets, and his stand has always been a favorite stop for so many of the restaurant chefs who shop on Saturdays.”

Grass seed industry group honors Riggers

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

The Nezperce Prairie Grass Growers Association at its 2021 annual meeting presented the David Mosman NPGGA Hall of Fame Award to Nathan “Nate” Riggers, a producer in north-central Idaho.

The award “recognizes growers and leaders who have made a contribution to the success and advancement of the grass seed industry in Idaho,” Executive Director Benjamin Kelly said.

The association created the award last year to honor Mosman, who died in September 2019 at 58.

Mosman was a “thinker, innovator and strong leader in the industry,” Kelly said.

“He was a neighbor of ours,” Riggers said. Both had sons join their families’ farms



Courtesy of Clearwater Farms

From left, Steven, Stan, Nathan and Chris Riggers.



Nathan Riggers

around the same time. Riggers said Mosman was instrumental in getting the state involved in regulating field burning, which since 2008 has been an state Department of Environmental Quality function. “It has been

pretty successful.”

Riggers graduated from the University of Idaho College of Agriculture in 1987. He worked in the grain and seed industry — for Jacklin Seed, Stegner Grain and Reed Grain and Bean — before joining father Stan and brother Steven on the family farming operation in 1992.

Riggers and his wife, Christine, have three children: Katy, Jonathan

and Christopher.

Christopher, 28, is a fifth-generation farmer.

“Christopher and his wife, Natalie, are partners in the farm,” Nate Riggers said.

The Riggers’ Clearwater Farms operate in the Nezperce-Craigmont area. The dryland farm produces turfgrass seed, winter wheat, canola, peas and lentils, chickpeas, and malting and food-grade barley.

Most of these commodities’ prices rebounded in the past six months after a roughly five-year lull, Riggers said.

“It’s getting fun again,” he said. “It’s always fun, but it’s more fun when there is good margin.”

Riggers said turfgrass seed markets — which were good for most of the past five years and tend to do well when the U.S. economy and dollar are

strong — are declining.

He believes in crop diversification.

“When you always have a foot in each stream, you can always look at something positive,” he said.

Riggers said his great-grandfather homesteaded in 1895. Four descendant farms including Clearwater operate in close proximity.

He was president of NPGGA for 10 years. He now is on the Northwest Farm Credit Services Board of Directors and is a Leadership Idaho Agriculture graduate.

“As a grower, I appreciate Nate’s willingness to approach issues from a farmer’s perspective in leadership roles and his continued representation of our industry across the state of Idaho and in the Pacific Northwest,” NPGGA President Greg Branson said.

Leiblsle promoted as new Idaho state veterinarian

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Dr. Scott Leiblsle is the new Idaho state veterinarian.

Leiblsle succeeds Dr. Bill Barton, who retired after 14 years. Leiblsle has been the deputy state veterinarian since 2011.

Dairy and beef cattle production are Idaho’s largest agricultural sectors and contribute more than half of the state’s farmgate receipts, the department said.

Idaho also has a sizable sheep herd and a growing goat herd, of which the Idaho State Department of Agriculture regulates some aspects.

“Dr. Barton showed his deep love of agricul-



Dr. Scott Leiblsle

ture through years of service and with steadfast commitment to all Idahoans,” ISDA Director Celia Gould said in a release. “He will always have a special place within this agency and among producers. I was honored to work alongside Bill these many years.”

ISDA said Barton and his staff achieved successes including efficiently responding to animal diseases, supporting service to a growing livestock sector, and worked on behalf of the state’s producers to maintain a functional marketplace and beyond.

“As sad as I am to see Dr. Barton’s departure from the agency, I am excited to announce the appointment of Dr. Scott Leiblsle as state veterinarian and administrator of ISDA’s Animal Industries Division,” Gould said. “I am incredibly grateful to have someone with his energy, intellect and experience. Scott has my complete confidence. He will be a great fit for this important role.”

The animal industries unit oversees livestock health, dairies and dairy processors, rangeland services and other aspects of animal-related agriculture.

“I’m very grateful Director Gould gave me the opportunity to transition into this new role,” Leiblsle said in an interview.

Leiblsle in the past few years worked on building and developing Idaho’s disease-traceability program, including creating an electronic system and database. He said he aims to build on that progress, important in disease surveillance and in maintaining a secure food supply.

“Transmittal (of data) in real time and moving at the speed of commerce is critical when dealing with livestock moving state-to-state,” he said.

Industry participation in the electronic system, which can receive data from veterinarians, is growing, Leiblsle said. It can reduce costs and enable “quicker response time in the event we need to find an animal or conduct disease surveillance.”

He said animal care “is always a priority, and we continue to work with local law enforcement. We have training opportunities all around the state for law enforcement. That has been going on for a number of years and we are excited to continue.”

Leiblsle, whose appointment is effective immediately, graduated from the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine in 2003. He worked in Idaho for the first time in 2005, practicing for two years at an equine facility in Bellevue. He then became the third generation of his family to practice large-animal medicine at the Elkhorn, Wis., Veterinary Clinic before returning to Idaho to join ISDA.

CALENDAR

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TUESDAY-WEDNESDAY FEB. 9-10

National Hemp Symposium (virtual): The National Academies of Sciences Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources and Oregon State University’s Global Hemp Innovation Center invite you to the inaugural National Hemp Symposium. This event will include a diverse program with a broad focus

on both what the industry has accomplished to date and what lies ahead. Major U.S. corporations participating in international supply chains across all sectors will join us to express their views on the science and R&D needs for the thousands of hemp-based sustainable products. Conference Services-Oregon State University, 541-737-9300, conferences@oregonstate.edu

TUESDAY-THURSDAY FEB. 9-11

World Ag Expo (virtual): The

World Ag Expo in Tulare, Calif., is moving online this year. It will kick off February 9-11, the original show dates. Live events and seminars will be scheduled 9 a.m.-4 p.m. PST each day, but content will be available on-demand at no charge to attendees around the clock. For more information, go to <https://www.worldagexpo.com/>

TUESDAY-THURSDAY FEB. 16-18

Northwest Agricultural Show (virtual): The 51st edition

of the Northwest Ag Show will be a free digital event featuring a daily lineup of presentations, virtual exhibitor booths and more. The event features equipment demos, networking opportunities and a schedule of educational programming. Attendees have the opportunity to live-chat and direct message with representatives from participating companies and take advantage of show specials. For more information, go to <https://northwestagshow.com/>

THURSDAY, FEB. 18

Idaho Hay and Forage Association Annual Conference (virtual): This is a chance for growers and others to get an update on the industry. <http://www.idahohay.com>

THURSDAY-FRIDAY FEB. 18-19

USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum (virtual): The forum includes outlooks on production, prices, trade and trends. Website: <https://www.usda.gov/oce/ag-outlook-forum>



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Index

Dairy 10
Markets 12
Opinion 6

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