



# MADERA COUNTY AGRICULTURE TODAY

## New bill aims to boost farmworker pay while easing strain on California farmers

*Press Release from California Farm Bureau*

Last week, Senator Shannon Grove (R-Bakersfield) introduced legislation to create a tax credit for agricultural employers to help cover the costs of providing overtime wages to farmworkers. SB 628, co-sponsored by California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG) and California Farm Bureau, aims to ensure that farmworkers have more opportunities to earn overtime pay while also providing relief to struggling agricultural businesses.

“California’s farmers and farmworkers are the backbone of our agricultural economy. Unfortunately, overtime mandates have made it harder for farmworkers to get the hours they need and for growers to get their product to market,” said Senator Shannon Grove. “SB 628 is a commonsense solution that ensures farmworkers have more opportunities to earn, while providing relief to our agricultural businesses who sustain the world’s food chain supply.”

SB 628 would do the following:

Establish a payroll tax credit allowing agricultural employers to offset the cost of overtime wages paid to their ag employees. NOTE: “Overtime wages” means the difference between the employees’ overtime rate of pay and

their regular rate of pay.

Help increase available overtime hours for farmworkers, boosting their take-home pay, and supporting much-needed financial stability in rural California.

“In 2016, when AB 1066 (Gonzalez) was approved to phase in agricultural overtime, growers warned that this new law would ultimately reduce farmworkers’ earnings,” said Natalie Collins, President of the California Association of Winegrape Growers. “Today, with the smallest winegrape harvest in 20 years, growers are struggling to stay in business. If legislators genuinely want to increase take-home pay for farmworkers, growers are going to need support from Sacramento to make it possible. CAWG thanks Senator Grove for her leadership on this important issue.”

“California farmers are incredibly resilient, but it is no secret that agriculture faces significant economic challenges,” said California Farm Bureau President Shannon Douglass. “Research has shown that placing the burden of overtime wages on farmers came at the expense of both farming operations and the families of farm employees. Senator Grove’s agricultural overtime tax credit bill is a sensible solution that will enable farmers to continue producing food while providing a real and richly deserved boost in take-home pay for farm employees. It is an investment in our food security and rural communities and in the long-term sustainability of production agriculture in California.”

Recent research supports these concerns. A 2023 study by the University of California, Berkeley (“California’s Overtime Law for Agricultural Workers: What Happened to Worker Hours and Pay?” ARE Update 27(1): 1–4. University of California Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics) found that California farmworkers have been earning less since the “Phase-In Overtime for Agricultural Workers Act of 2016” became law. The study concluded, “This early evidence suggests that the law may not be benefiting the workers they aim to protect.”

SB 628 follows the lead of other states that have recognized the unintended consequences of agricultural overtime laws and acted to ensure farmworkers can still earn overtime pay:

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## Upcoming Events

4/23 MCFB Board of Directors Meeting

4/25 Last day to purchase Margaritas at the Mahils’ Tickets before price increases

5/4 Margaritas at the Mahils’ Annual Scholarship Fundraiser

**Check out our Events Page at [mcfb.com/trainings-workshops](https://mcfb.com/trainings-workshops)**





# President's Message

## Madera County Farm Bureau

Laura Gutile  
President

Well, hello Springtime! This is my favorite time of the year. I've written about it before but it bears repeating! For me, Spring is when my heart truly believes and feels the renewal of life. Baby chicks, little bunnies, tiny hummingbirds, wild flowers and pistachio trees that are getting puffy tips. I love it all!! I take deep, cleansing breaths and then cough and sniffle because of all the pollen in the air and then do it all over again.

This is also the time of year that I get to help interview students hoping to be awarded one of our scholarships. I'm a broken record on this, I know. But, truly, reading through the applications, especially the short essays we ask the students to write about themselves fills me with renewed hope for the future of agriculture and our country. This year we had 23 applicants. 23!! It's another record "crop" and we awarded 17, which is another record. It's so difficult to choose awardees. We want to fund them all! With so many, we took closer looks at their stated major and intent of a career after college. For me, I also wanted to know if their intent is to come back to the Central Valley or somehow directly represent our area. This is where interviewing the students comes in. A team of three Scholarship Trustees does the interviews. The students come in and we start a conversation. We try to keep the interviews to 10 minutes but sometimes we get so caught up in how passionate these young people are. Where they've been, this next chapter and where they see themselves a few years from now makes for great conversations. We usually conclude the interviews with asking if they have any questions. Often we get asked if we farm. This year there were a couple of questions regarding how we got involved in Farm Bureau and why we choose to serve our community in this capacity. Answering these questions allows me time to reflect on the why.

I started serving as a director when I was nominated by my brother to replace him on the board as he was leaving to enjoy retirement from farming. He told me that I needed to say yes if I was contacted by the nominating committee. Even though I felt woefully under qualified, I needed to say yes because I represented small farmers. A few years later, I realized that I also represent women in agriculture. When I said yes to my brother, I started an accidental chain reaction of saying yes to most things I feel nervous about. When I said yes to being part of the Scholarship Committee and a Trustee, I felt unqualified because I went to a trade school to earn medical administrative certificates. As I developed into the current version of myself, I found a calling to hold the door open for young people to enter the agricultural arena. We need their passion, their drive, their fresh view of the world around them. We owe it to ourselves to listen to their ideas. We need to be open to being taught new tricks. It's nice to have an answer to the question of why. I'm here now and I want agriculture to be relevant in the future. I want to be able to feed my great grandchildren (if I'm so blessed!) with whole, California grown foods. I'm here to help hold open the door for our future in agriculture.

That brings me to talking about our scholarship fundraiser and I believe this is our 30th year! Margaritas at the Mahils' is returning this year on Sunday, May 4th from 11am-2pm. There will be tacos with all the fixins, raffle and silent auction items, scholarship awardee acknowledgements and margaritas. We will have some live entertainment and a great time. It's a great way to help fund our future and usher in Spring. So, get out your springtime garden party attire, maybe a fabulous hat and don't forget the sunscreen! This fundraiser is all about the students and celebrating where they have been and where they are going. If you aren't able to make the event, perhaps you would be willing to send in a donation to the office. Just specify "Scholarship" in the memo line. I'm looking forward to seeing everyone there!! Happy Springtime y'all! Below is a reminder of last year's event to get you even more excited for this year's!





# Member Darren Schmall, Pizza Farm Agri-tainment Company Named Madera County 2025 Small Business of the Year by Valley Community SBDC

The Valley Community Small Business Development Center (SBDC) awarded the Pizza Farm Agri-tainment Company its 2025 Madera County Small Business of the Year, an honor owner Darren Schmall holds dear for its testament to his resilience and transformative partnership with the SBDC. The Pizza Farm Agri-tainment Company includes ApCal Rock'n Ranch, Raisin Hell Ranch Haunted Attractions, and MegaFlora Tree Farms.

The company was recognized at the National SBDC Day Luncheon, which spotlights exceptional entrepreneurial achievement across the Central Valley. This prestigious award, given to just four businesses—one from each of Fresno, Madera, Tulare, and Kings Counties—celebrates innovation, resilience, and community impact, with fewer than 1% of regional businesses earning this elite recognition.

Schmall views the award as a deeply personal milestone. “The Valley Community SBDC and Director Richard Mostert have been essential to the growth and success of my businesses,” he said. “This recognition is incredibly important to me because it reflects our shared journey—overcoming obstacles like the pandemic to create something extraordinary for our community.” With SBDC’s guidance, Schmall relocated and expanded his operations to a 40-acre site during COVID-19, driving the evolution of his agri-tainment empire.

ApCal Rock'n Ranch, a top outdoor venue, expanded from a 1,000-person capacity to over 6,000, hosting concerts, events and festivals. Raisin Hell Ranch Haunted Attractions, co-located with ApCal, was named the #3 scariest haunt in California and grew attendance by 30% last fall, with plans for further expansion. MegaFlora Tree Farms is the exclusive Western U.S. grower and distributor of a new breed of incredibly ecologically sound and fast-growing shade trees. Schmall’s enterprises began with the 1993 launch of The Pizza Farm agriculture education program, aimed at showing school children where their favorite foods came from.

Presented on March 19, 2025, at the National SBDC Day Luncheon, Schmall’s award was amplified by honors from California legislators. Assemblymembers David Tangipa (District 8), Alexandra Macedo (District 33), and Esmeralda Soria (District 27), along with Senators Shannon Grove (District 12) and Anna Caballero (District 14), commended his entrepreneurial and civic impact, reinforcing the Valley Community SBDC recognition.

From pioneering agri-tourism in the Central Valley to bringing great entertainment and innovative agricultural products, Schmall’s 2025 Madera County Business of the Year award cements his legacy and the SBDC’s vital role in fostering small business excellence.



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# Fresno-Madera YF&R Update Column

The Fresno Madera Young Farmers & Ranchers (FMYFR) met for their monthly meeting in Madera at TEP, on Tuesday, March 4th.

TEP is owned by the Erickson family who have been farming in Madera County for over 100 years. TEP specializes in five unique soil amendments formulated to improve the quality and longevity of the soil. Plant nutrition is another critical product at TEP. There are four different types, and each product is designed to develop a sustainable crop.

Lee Erickson and Jason Ward kindly showed our YF&R group around their facility. Lee stated that they are busy year-round and ship about seven trucks daily from their ranch in Madera. Our YF&R group learned how each product was made using the equipment they designed and implemented in 2018.

Our group is always eager to learn more about the various businesses within Fresno and Madera Counties. We enjoy industry tours of different facilities and would appreciate any connections willing to host for future meetings.

YF&R's April meetings focused on water in Madera and Fresno County. Food Grows Where Water Flows: The Friant Water Authority, Kings River Water Association, Water Wise, and Madera Irrigation District presented on the important water issues and information for the counties. Madera's was held at the new Will Gill Pavilion and Fresno's was held at FCFB.

YF&R's fundraiser this year will focus on T-shirt sponsorships and sales. Proceeds go towards scholarships, donations to local food banks and the next generation of leaders in agriculture. To donate or purchase, click here.

YF&R also recently announced scholarship applications are now available. Two \$1,000 scholarships will be awarded to one Madera County student and one Fresno County student. Recipients are asked to accept the scholarship in person at a YF&R committee meeting whose date and location will be communicated upon notification of the scholarship award. Click here to access the application.

Young Farmers & Ranchers is open to any one with a passion or interest in agriculture between the ages of 18-35. If you are interested in being involved with the leadership of YF&R and the Farm Bureau, you can become a member of Madera County Farm Bureau as a Collegiate, Associate, or Agricultural member.



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**Make sure that you are a MCFB Member!**

**What is Madera County Farm Bureau?**

Farm Bureau is the unified national voice of agriculture, we work to enhance and strengthen the lives of rural Americans and to build strong, prosperous communities.

Madera County Farm Bureau has been working to keep local farmers farming since 1915 supporting family farms & ranches as they raise safe, local food.

**What does Madera County Farm Bureau do?**

As a grassroots organization, MCFB represents and protects the farming and ranching way of life by influencing policy at all levels of government.

- Communicating the value of farmland
- Connecting consumers with their food
  - Competing for the future
- Ensuring farmers can grow and market their products
- Provide resources for farms and rural communities
  - Attend City Council & Board of Supervisor meetings
  - Oversee land use policies and protection of the Williamson Act
    - Contact Elected Officials
- Provides information, resources, and farm safety trainings
- Awarded \$134,000 in scholarships to students pursuing careers within agriculture this year

# Annual Scholarship Fundraiser 2025

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# California develops self-pollinating nonpareil almonds to reduce costs and bee reliance

*By GW Wire*

The nonpareil almond, favored for its consistent color and sweet taste, accounts for nearly 40% of California's almond production, according to the Almond Board of California. However, its cultivation requires pollinator trees and bees, leading to increased costs and complexities for growers. Thomas Gradziel, a geneticist at UC Davis, highlights the challenges of relying on pollinizer trees and bees, especially with rising bee mortality rates.

In response, two laboratories are exploring solutions with the development of self-pollinating nonpareil varieties. Ohalo Genetics, based in Aptos, aims to initiate nursery trials for its FruitionOne this year, with limited availability by 2026. Burchell Nursery plans informational town halls regarding its Nonpareil+ in early 2024. John Dombrosky, Ohalo's chief commercial officer, explains the approach as "speed breeding," enhancing selective breeding processes without introducing new DNA.

California, producing 80% of the world's almond supply, saw its 2023 crop valued at \$3.88 billion. The almond industry continually seeks innovations to improve efficiency. Dombrosky emphasizes the potential economic benefits of self-pollinating varieties, which could double yield efficiencies and reduce environmental impact.

Bee dependency poses risks due to fragile bee populations and colony collapse disorder. Gradziel notes that California's almond orchards require 2 million beehives, highlighting the industry's reliance on bees. The Almond Board of California is monitoring developments in self-pollinating varieties, recognizing the industry's history of adapting farming techniques.

While self-pollinating almonds like the Independence variety exist, widespread adoption of new varieties takes time. Mark Turmon of Sierra Valley Almonds notes growers' hesitance with untested varieties. Long-term testing is crucial, as almond trees have a lifecycle of 25 years. Dombrosky acknowledges that adoption may be gradual but remains confident in the potential of self-pollinating nonpareil clones.

Ohalo collaborates with Sierra Gold Nurseries for distribution, planning test plots, and preorders by 2026. The focus extends beyond initial generations, with ongoing research into environmental efficiencies. The first adopters will likely be growers willing to experiment with new approaches, as Dombrosky emphasizes the long-term perspective required for almond cultivation.

## Heavy bee mortality puts almond pollination at risk

*By Christine Souze, California Farm Bureau*

California almond orchards have turned snowy white, signaling the start of bloom. However, beekeepers say that bee mortality rates are at an all-time high, and they are concerned there may not be enough honeybees to pollinate the 2025 almond crop.

"The commercial beekeeping industry is experiencing significant hive losses nationwide," said Ryan Burris, president of the California State Beekeepers Association.

Burris, a fourth-generation Shasta County beekeeper and queen bee breeder, said he is especially concerned about growers who did not secure pollination contracts with beekeepers early in the year.

Hives contain an average of eight frames of bees, with two hives per acre needed for pollination, Burris said. There's concern that some growers may not be able to get enough bees to cover all their almond acres or that the strength of the hives may not be what growers need.

The cost to rent colonies this year is about \$225 each, Burris said.

Commercial beekeepers from California and other states, including as far away as Florida, Georgia, Wisconsin and Montana, annually supply more than 2 million honeybee colonies to pollinate the state's 1.4 million bearing almond acres.

Beekeepers report that bee mortality rates spiked in February and exceeded the 30% average loss that they usually experience. Commercial beekeepers reported a 62% average loss during the past nine months, according to a survey conducted by a bee sector working group.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Tulare County beekeeper Steve Godlin, who retired last fall after 50 years in the business, said he experienced bee losses off and on during his career.

He noted how his hives were heavy with bees last September, but a month later, “we started seeing a couple of loads going downhill.” By November, some hives were left with just a cup or two of bees and a queen, with dead bees on the ground.

“This year is looking like one of the worst,” Godlin said, suggesting that the issue may be a new strain of Nosema, a disease that destroys the hive.

He said lost bees and a drop in the honey price had taken a toll on his business, which “has been my life.”

“My brother Paul and I sold the bees, sold the trucks, sold all the comb, all the supers and anything bee related before Thanksgiving,” he said.

Beekeepers say the heightened bee mortality this season could stem from a combination of environmental stressors, including poor nutrition and limited access to diverse forage, parasites and pathogens, and pesticide exposure.

Burris said he believes the Varroa mite, an external parasite that attacks and feeds on honeybees, is the No. 1 cause of bee losses this year. The mite’s population continues to increase until the pest kills the entire bee colony. With a limited number of tools available for managing Varroa mites, resistance has become an issue.

Burris said there are fewer tools for beekeepers to treat infected hives. With mite levels so high this year, it was hard for them to keep populations under control, he added.

Danielle Downey, executive director of Project Apis m., a nonprofit organization dedicated to honeybee research, said scientists at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service are working with beekeeping organizations to gather data and assess potential causes of the losses. USDA is testing samples of bees to determine viral loads.

In the meantime, with a shortage of bees, beehives are a target of thieves, and stolen hives have been reported in many counties. This past fall, Godlin said 136 of his previously owned hives were stolen, representing a loss of about \$55,000, which includes the value of the hives and lost income.

California beekeepers have experienced an 87% increase in hive thefts since 2013, with losses estimated at more than \$3.5 million, Burris noted.

“Beekeepers have to take action that will result in criminal convictions in order to stop these thefts,” he said.

To help members of CSBA, the organization announced a partnership with Pipkin Detective Agency, which is donating 50 hours of free time to investigate hive thefts. To prevent thefts, beekeepers are encouraged to mark hives with names, distinctive brands and use tracking devices such as air tags and immediately report missing hives to local law enforcement.

“Every step you take to protect your hives will decrease the chance of theft or, at least, increase the likelihood of a criminal conviction if stolen,” Burris said.

CSBA offers a reward of \$10,000 to anyone who provides information that leads to the arrest and conviction of perpetrators who stole a member’s beehives.

Total hive value ranges between \$350-\$500 per hive. This includes the cost of the hive, plus lost income for pollination, future honey crop and the ability to split the hive to create more bees for the next season.

Fresno County almond grower Lorna Roush said she received her bees a few weeks ago and has enough to pollinate her almond crop this year. She noted her almond trees started bloom in late January, which she considers early. She grows Nonpareil, Sonora, Wood Colony and Shasta, a self-pollinating variety.

“We have a really good relationship with our beekeeper,” she said.

A concern for Roush and other growers is that cool weather during bloom could mean that bees may not get enough flight time to effectively pollinate their trees, though warming temperatures this week could change that.

(Christine Souza is an assistant editor of Ag Alert. She may be contacted at [csouza@cxfb.com](mailto:csouza@cxfb.com).)





## SprayDays Information Sheet for Growers and Pesticide Applicators

The new regulations, approved by the Office of Administrative Law on December 13, 2024 and effective February 24, 2025, enable the implementation of **SprayDays California**, a statewide restricted material pesticide application notification system developed by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR). This system has been designed with input gathered from extensive public outreach and engagement efforts over a four-year period.

### **DPR anticipates implementing the statewide system in late March 2025.**

The new SprayDays system will provide the public with timely information in advance of restricted material pesticide applications in production agriculture.

The system will feature a web-based map and option to sign-up for email or text message notifications sent 48 hours prior to the intended use of soil fumigants and 24 hours prior to the intended use of other restricted material pesticides.

The SprayDays website will include:

- Pesticide safety information, including reminders to avoid application sites and follow any posted warning signs.
- Notices that applications may begin within a four-day window or may not occur at all.
- Information on the restricted material pesticides included in the system.
- Context on how pesticides are regulated in California.

### **What do the regulations require for growers and applicators?**

Starting February 24, 2025, the regulations require the electronic submission of all Notices of Intent (NOIs) for the use of

restricted material pesticides in production agriculture to the County Agricultural Commissioner (CAC) through CalAgPermits, or third-party tools currently used to submit NOIs to CalAgPermits.

If a grower or applicator cannot submit an NOI electronically due to undue hardship (e.g., internet outage, limited access to electricity, or a declared emergency), the CAC may authorize alternative submission formats, including allowing paper submission of NOIs. In such cases, the CAC will upload select NOI data into CalAgPermits.org on behalf of the grower or applicator.

### **Will this change how growers and applicators currently submit NOIs to their CAC?**

The only change is that NOIs must be submitted electronically to the CAC through CalAgPermits except in cases of undue hardship. Growers who already use CalAgPermits to submit NOIs, or third-party tools currently used to submit NOIs to CalAgPermits, will experience no change to their process.





### **What information will be shared with the public from the NOI through SprayDays California?**

The SprayDays California website will share:

- The intended date and time of the pesticide application. (Notifications and the website will clearly state that applications may begin within a four-day window or may not occur at all.)
- The location of the application within a 1x1 mile grid, consistent with information listed on NOIs and reported through Pesticide Use Reports (PURs).
- Application information including pesticide product name(s), active ingredient(s), application method, number of treated acres, and U.S. EPA registration number.

This information will be publicly accessible concurrent with NOI submission and will remain on the website for four days following the intended application date.

### **What information will be shared with the public to support public safety near pesticide applications?**

The SprayDays system provides information on the safe and legal use of pesticides in California and reminders to stay away from fields and follow posted warning signs when pesticides are in use.

### **What additional information will be provided on the SprayDays website?**

The SprayDays website will also provide responses to frequently asked questions about the notification system and restricted material pesticides, including context on pesticide regulation in California, explanations of how pesticides are evaluated before registration, and pesticide safety tips, such as reminders to avoid application sites and adhere to posted warning signs.

### **If a grower or applicator submits an NOI but the application does not occur, is the information removed from SprayDays California?**

SprayDays shares NOI information concurrent with its submission to the CAC. If a grower or applicator decides not to proceed with the application, the information will not be removed. However, the SprayDays website and notifications note prominently that the application may not occur or may be rescheduled for a variety of reasons, including

a decrease in the pest presence or changes in weather conditions.

### **Will the system be updated or changed in the future in response to feedback received after SprayDays launches?**

The regulation requires DPR to collect broad public comment, along with comment from the State Board of Food and Agriculture and DPR's Environmental Justice Advisory Committee, on an annual basis to inform a final report on the effectiveness and impact of the regulation issued three years after the system is launched. DPR encourages growers, applicators, all interested parties and the public to provide comments to be included in the annual status update and inform any future adaptations necessary to meet the goal of increased transparency and continued safe, legal pesticide use in California. The comment period will be open in late 2025 or early 2026 and more information will be available on DPR's website ([www.cdpr.ca.gov](http://www.cdpr.ca.gov)).

### **How does SprayDays California work in conjunction with the annual pesticide use notification requirements near schools and childcare facilities?**

The new regulations do not exempt growers or applicators from providing annual notification to school sites within ¼ mile of their production agricultural properties, as required by 3CCR 6692. For more information on pesticide use near school sites: [www.cdpr.ca.gov/cac-letter/compliance-assistance-for-agricultural-pesticide-use-near-schoolsites](http://www.cdpr.ca.gov/cac-letter/compliance-assistance-for-agricultural-pesticide-use-near-schoolsites)

### **Who should I contact if I have questions about the system or how it works?**

- For information on submitting your NOI electronically or regarding hardship exceptions, please contact your County Agricultural Commissioner.
- For questions about the SprayDays California website, contact the Department of Pesticide Regulation at [spraydays@cdpr.ca.gov](mailto:spraydays@cdpr.ca.gov)



# Continued from Cover - New Legislation

By Robert Rodriguez, *The Fresno Bee*, February 2, 2025

Oregon offers a refundable personal or corporate income tax credit for employers based on overtime wages paid to agricultural workers through 2028.

New York offers a similar tax credit through 2032 that is based on the eligible overtime agricultural businesses pay.

Together, Senator Shannon Grove, CAWG and the California Farm Bureau are advocating for a policy that both increases farmworker earnings and provides relief to an industry facing unprecedented financial challenges. California must ensure that policies designed to help farmworkers do not inadvertently reduce their wages.

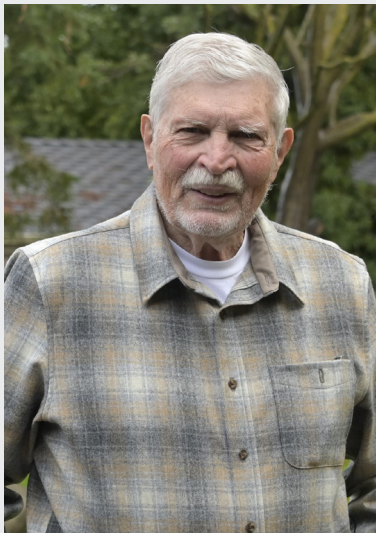
Media contacts:

Senator Shannon Grove – Brooke Lackey, (916) 223-3282, Brooke.Lackey@sen.ca.gov

California Association of Winegrape Growers – Mindy DeRohan, o: (916) 379-8995, c: (209) 604-3330,

Mindy@cawg.org

California Farm Bureau – Barbara Arciero, (916) 561-5574, barciero@cfbf.com



## Madera Chamber of Commerce Names Jim Unti 2025 Senior Farmer of the Year

Madera, CA – The Madera Chamber of Commerce is proud to announce Jim Unti as the 2025 Senior Farmer of the Year. Jim has dedicated his life to farming in Madera County, having spent 82 years in the region and continuing to farm to this day.

Born in 1943 on a Madera farm, Jim's career in agriculture spans decades. He has been involved in farming since his youth, aside from a brief stint in college and 10 years of service in the U.S. Foreign Service. Jim currently farms 164 acres on the original family farm, which dates back to 1945. His operations include wine grapes, table grapes, almonds, and canning olives. The farm's early years saw the production of alfalfa, cotton, dry beans, raisins, and wine grapes, reflecting Jim's lifelong commitment to the land.

From 1978 to 2008, Jim made significant contributions to the agricultural and wine industries. He served as the Vice President of Grower Relations for Constellation Wine Company and as the General Manager of California Products Grape Distillery. Jim's active participation supported the growth of Constellation from a small, family-owned company to the largest wine company in the world.

Jim's involvement with various agricultural organizations has been substantial. He served on the Board of Directors for the California Wine Institute and was instrumental in the development of the Sustainable Wine Grape Growing Initiative. Additionally, Jim was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation from the California Department of Food and Agriculture for his work as Treasurer of the Pierce's Disease/Glassy Wing Sharpshooter Board.

A dedicated advocate for local agriculture, Jim was a founding member and key force behind the creation of the San Joaquin Valley Winegrowers Association, which honored him with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2021. He has also served in various leadership roles, including as a past member of Rotary, a former member of the Madera Chamber of Commerce board, and currently as a member of the Madera County Farm Bureau and the Madera Ag Water Association.

Jim holds a Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Business from Fresno State University and a Master's in Agricultural Economics from Oregon State University. His career took him and wife, Tina, overseas for 10 years with USAID. While stationed in Pakistan, they welcomed their son, Eric. A few years later, while in Chile, their son Chris was born. During his time abroad, Jim played a key role in the Green Revolution in Asia and helped rebuild agricultural programs in post-Allende Chile.

Upon returning to the Valley in 1978, Jim continued his farming legacy while playing an influential role in the wine industry for over 30 years.

In 2015, Jim pioneered the farming of new varieties of table grapes in the area, further expanding his agricultural footprint. His decades of expertise in farming, wine production, and agricultural business have made a lasting impact on Madera County and beyond.

A dinner to honor Jim Unti will take place on June 19, 2025, at the Madera Municipal Golf Course at 6:00 p.m. For more information, please contact the Madera Chamber of Commerce at 559.673.3563 or visit [www.maderachamber.com](http://www.maderachamber.com).





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## County Trapper Services



United States Department of Agriculture

**Alex Schaefer**

Wildlife Specialist, Madera County  
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service  
Wildlife Services-California Program

5151 Pentecost Drive, Suite H, Modesto, CA 95356  
Office: 209-579-2891 • Cell: 209-769-4949  
Email: Alexander.R.Schaefer@usda.gov  
www.aphis.usda.gov

“This is a county cost share program provided for agricultural producers of Madera county facing wildlife damage or depredation to livestock, crops, or property. Commonly known as a “government trapper” and based in Madera, I specialize in medium to large mammalian wildlife species. Direct control or technical assistance can be provided at producer’s request. Contact the cell phone number provided for more information.”

- Alex Schaefer

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### Contact:

[anne@maderafb.com](mailto:anne@maderafb.com)

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# Local Control: The Cost and Pain Points – April 2025 Blog

## *From Water Blueprint for the San Joaquin Valley*

With the recent celebration of the 10-year anniversary of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act of 2014 (SGMA), it seems appropriate to look back at one of the fundamental elements on which it was founded: local control. Many fought for local control when the legislation was being developed prior to its passage in 2014, arguing groundwater management is best accomplished at the local level. This is contrary to how new state regulations are implemented, from the top down.

This foundational concept of local control captures the essence of SGMA: granting first authority to locals to create and maintain sustainable groundwater conditions. From the formation of groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) to developing the groundwater sustainability plans (GSPs) to completing projects and implementing management actions, the onerous effort is put on the locals. Of course, SGMA accounted for and includes a state back-stop, the State Water Resources Control Board (State Board), for when the locals struggle and need temporary oversight through the probationary process.

While locals fought for and ultimately won local control as the default setting under SGMA, the costs incurred so far have been a reality check. Achieving groundwater sustainability in the critically over-drafted basins in the Central Valley is a challenging endeavor that requires hefty investment. The California Department of Water Resources (DWR) recently reported that there are 86 basins with approved GSPs and seven (7) with inadequate GSPs. Whether approved or inadequate, the cost to achieve groundwater sustainability is significant and comes in many forms.

The Kings Subbasin is one of the 86 basins with an approved GSP. The cost of local control in the Kings Subbasin has mostly been focused on the construction of groundwater recharge basins and projects with more than 600 acres of basins either complete or under construction since 2020, at a cost of more than \$50 million. Much of the Kings Subbasin is situated in parts of Fresno County where the soil conditions are sandy and prime for getting significant amounts of water into the aquifer. The groundwater recharge basins allow for surface water to be captured and percolate to replenish the groundwater aquifer, which pays dividends in wet years like 2023, when historic amounts of groundwater recharge were realized. A remarkable 500,000 acre-feet of recharge within the Kings Subbasin footprint, just shy of one million acres, was accomplished in 2023. That is the equivalent of a Millerton Lake (capacity of about 500,000 acre-feet) being stored underground to replenish the aquifer in the Kings Subbasin boundary. And there are more basins planned to be able to do even more when there is available surface water.

### **Unanticipated Cost of Local Control:**

While much activity has been focused on the recharge projects, other costs of maintaining local control have become evident. One of those with a significant price tag is the requirement to develop, launch, and fund programs mitigating impacts to domestic wells that run dry due to declining groundwater levels. While the Kings Subbasin, and other subbasins, would argue the SGMA timeline allows 20 years to reach sustainability and begin mitigating for impacts to groundwater uses and users, DWR had a different determination, which required the mitigation program to be implemented and funded by the time the first periodic evaluation was submitted in January 2025. Public entities make up many of the GSAs in the Kings Subbasin and are limited by Proposition 218 to be able to increase fees and generate revenues, creating a significant challenge to funding a brand-new program far ahead of the previously anticipated schedule and one with a significant price tag. The Kings Subbasin GSAs scrambled to demonstrate to DWR its commitment to maintaining local control by launching its domestic well mitigation program in October 2024 with dedicated funding.

### **Other Costs:**

GSA managers across the Central Valley and the State may argue there are some elements of SGMA which would be easier to implement by mandate rather than a delegated local issue. However, you would not have to search too far to find a GSA manager of a basin in the probationary status with the State Board to find a counter argument for holding local control sacred. Change is hard, and meaningful stakeholder engagement...of all stakeholders...takes time, but both are essential elements to maintain local control and achieve groundwater sustainability. More changes and more costs are coming, including the following:

Oversight Over Groundwater Pumping/Extractions

Well Locations/Registration

Increasing Existing Reservoir Capacity

Expanding Recharge Capabilities

New Regulations to Comply With

Whether change is required by the GSA or prompted by local landowners wanting to do their part to help achieve groundwater sustainability, every action results in being one step closer to the goal. Much has already been invested in developing GSPs which cost as much as \$1M funded by locals and through DWR Proposition 1 grant dollars and



includes the necessary outreach and technical support to develop the GSPs, the roadmap to sustainability.

### Why It's Worth It:

The attacks on local control have begun and will continue as GSAs navigate to chart their path to groundwater sustainability. Attacks have already started including those launched through proposed well permitting legislation, which sought to strip local control from county permitting agencies and GSAs for issuance of new well permits. The regulation would have applied across all high and medium priority basins designated by DWR and removed local control from the newly formed GSAs. Each year, there are multiple legislative bills proposed to modify SGMA, and most are aimed at removing local control and replacing it with requirements by regulation. While SGMA granted local control, it does not address every issue. Local GSAs, their elected boards, and stakeholders are committed to continuing implementation and avoiding the State Board probationary status in which everyone's attention is focused on meeting regulatory deadlines rather than stepping appropriately through designing management actions. Local control is worth protecting and defending because the alternative is far more costly and doesn't eliminate the need for change.

### Final Thought:

A reminder of why SGMA is different and why maintaining local control is the far better alternative: when the pain of local control seems unbearable, it's good to remember why local control is integral to the foundation and concept of SGMA. Local leaders, working day in and day out on SGMA, bring local knowledge and connections honed by years of experience functioning within the landscape of local elected officials, technical professionals, public agencies, and special district staff who are all motivated to achieve success by 2040. These leaders face the challenging responsibility of local control which means decisions must be made to address the conditions, concerns, and restraints of all stakeholders who are directly impacted. Fact: The next 15 years will be filled with pain points. Navigating and overcoming those... together... are necessary to keep the Central Valley thriving for generations to come. Yes. The costs will be significant. But the alternative is far more costly.

## Final 2024 California Grape Crush, Not Quite as Small as Projected

*By California Ag Network, March 20, 2025*

C DFA recently released their Final 2024 California Grape Crush Report, totaling 2,961,433 tons, down 24.1% from the 2023 crush of 3,899,631 tons. The final report reflects a 43,275 ton increase from the preliminary report released last month, which still represents a historic, significant decline compared with the last 20 years of harvests in California. Red wine varieties accounted for the largest share of all grapes crushed, at 1,466,346 tons, down 25.7% from 2023. White wine varieties crushed totaled 1,417,993 tons, down 17.2% from 2023. Tons crushed of raisin type varieties totaled 23,630, down 51.7% from 2023, and tons crushed of table type varieties totaled 53,463, down 67.8% from 2023. For a full analysis of the report, view a recording of American Vineyard Live webcast featuring Turrentine Brokerage [HERE](#).

The Grape Crush Report includes the total number of tons crushed for concentrate production. In determining grape tonnage crushed for concentrate production, each processor was required to report the estimated equivalent tons of grapes crushed for grape concentrate. For the 2024 season, this total was 270,519 tons, 9.1% of the 2024 grape crush total. This report provides only the aggregate figure for grapes crushed for concentrate production and does not include information by district, type, or variety.

The 2024 average price of all varieties was \$1,009.60, down 2.9% from 2023. Average prices for the 2024 crop by type were as follows: red wine grapes, \$1,335.93, down 0.7% from 2023; white wine grapes, \$706.84, down 3.6% from 2023; raisin grapes, \$296.41, up 2.9% from 2023; and table grapes, \$150.65, down 22.5% from 2023.

In 2024, Chardonnay continued to account for the largest percentage of the total tonnage crushed at 17.8%. Cabernet Sauvignon accounted for the second largest percentage of the total crush at 15.4%. Raisin grape varieties crushed for wine accounted for 0.8% of the total crush and table varieties crushed for wine were 1.8% of the total crush.

District 13 (Madera, Fresno, Alpine, Mono, Inyo Counties; and Kings and Tulare Counties north of Nevada Avenue (Avenue 192)), had the largest share of the State's crush at 907,220 tons. The average price per ton in District 13 was \$338.64.

Grapes produced in District 4 (Napa County) received the highest average price at \$6,938.96 per ton, down 1.3% from 2023. District 3 (Sonoma and Marin counties) received the second highest average price at \$2,927.18 per ton, down 1.8% from 2023.

The 2024 Chardonnay average price of \$1,056.63 was down 1.4% from 2023 and the Cabernet Sauvignon average price of \$2,181.93 was up 2.7% from 2023. The 2024 average price for French Colombard was \$306.60, down 3.7% from 2023, while the Pinot Noir average price was up 1.6% from 2023, at \$1,728.36 per ton.

The Final Grape Crush Report includes all grape tonnage crushed during the 2024 season. It also includes purchased tonnage and pricing information for grapes with final prices prior to January 10, 2025.

Scan for full crush report:



# Avian flu cases continue to rise across the San Joaquin Valley, and it's not just among birds

By Tim Sheehan, March 5, 2025

Nearly 20 million chickens, ducks and turkeys on farms in the San Joaquin Valley have been “depopulated” – a polite term for killed – as bird flu, or avian influenza, continues to infect poultry flocks across California and the U.S.

That's almost 85% of all avian flu cases among both commercial and backyard flocks statewide since the current national outbreak of the virus began in February 2022.

And there are few signs of the virus slowing down.

“Outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in commercial table egg layer flocks in the first two months of 2025 have resulted in the depopulation of 30.1 million birds” nationwide, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Livestock and Poultry Program reported on Feb. 28.

Within the Valley, from San Joaquin County in the north to Kern County in the south, more than 750,000 birds from infected flocks have been culled just in the first two months of 2025 to prevent the continuing spread of the bird flu virus.

But the virus is not confined only to poultry or other birds. Statewide, California health officials report there have been 38 confirmed cases among humans, with most of those occurring within the San Joaquin Valley. Nationwide, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported there have been 70 bird flu cases in people in 12 states, including one death.

Dairies across the state are also being affected. A total of 749 confirmed cases of bird flu among dairy cattle have been reported in California through the entirety of the outbreak, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, amounting to more than three-quarters of all confirmed livestock cases reported in 18 states nationwide.

## Egg prices feeling the effects

The ongoing deadly outbreak among California's commercial poultry flocks comes at a point when people are clamoring about high food prices, including eggs. More than 11 million of the fowl culled in the Valley region are commercial laying hens, putting a huge dent in the egg supply, consequently contributing to egg prices that have climbed by more than \$1 per dozen in California since the start of the year.

The USDA reports that “California compliant” eggs (eggs that have been subjected to measures to reduce the risk of salmonella contamination) were selling at \$8.97 per dozen on Jan. 2, but as of Feb. 28 were up to \$10.07 per dozen.

That creates additional challenges in a region in which more than one out of every five households – almost 280,000 families – rely on SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, formerly known as food stamps, to help them put food on the table.

The USDA announced in late February that it would undertake a \$1 billion effort to battle the outbreak and lower egg prices. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins laid out a plan by the Trump administration to spend \$500 million on biosecurity measures and \$400 million for financial relief to affected farmers.

The USDA plan also includes \$100 million for vaccine development and exploring ways to minimize depopulation of infected flocks.

Beyond egg-laying hens, more than 6 million broiler chickens and breeders have been culled in the Valley, along with about 720,000 turkeys, and more than 600,000 meat and breeder ducks.

## Most of California's human cases are in the Valley

More than half of the 70 confirmed human cases of avian flu in the U.S. have occurred in California. So far, all but two of California's 38 cases have contracted the virus through exposure to dairy herds.

In the Valley, at least 31 cases of bird flu among humans have been reported since October:

- 18 in Tulare County
- 4 in Kern County
- 3 in San Joaquin County
- 2 in Kings County
- 2 in Madera County
- 1 in Stanislaus County
- 1 in Fresno County

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE





Nearly all of the Valley cases have been the result of contact with infected dairy cattle or other livestock, according to health officials.

The Fresno County Department of Public Health and the CDC report that the virus can spread through droplets or particles from the feces, raw milk or saliva of an infected animal. The virus can enter through a person's eyes, nose or mouth, including through breathing. The most at-risk people are those who handle raw milk from infected cows, those who care for sick animals or who clean livestock pens or barns.

Human symptoms include tears, pink eye or eye redness or irritation; fever of 100 degrees or higher; cough; sore throat; breathing difficulty or shortness of breath; headaches; runny or stuffy nose; muscle or body aches; or diarrhea.

Tim Sheehan is the Health Care Reporting Fellow at the nonprofit Central Valley Journalism Collaborative. The fellowship is supported by a grant from the Fresno State Institute for Media and Public Trust. Contact Sheehan at [tim@cvlocaljournalism.org](mailto:tim@cvlocaljournalism.org).

## USDA Announced a 5-Prong Plan to Lower Egg Prices

USDA is investing up to \$1 Billion to combat avian flu and reduce egg prices

### **Invest in Gold-Standard Biosecurity Measures for all U.S. Poultry Producers**

USDA will expand its highly successful Wildlife Biosecurity Assessments to producers across the nation, beginning with egg-layer facilities, to safeguard farms from the cause of 83% of HPAI cases: transmission from wild birds. These additional safety measures have proven to minimize flu cases; the approximately 150 facilities that follow these protocols have had only one outbreak.

USDA will share up to 75% of the costs to fix the highest risk biosecurity concerns identified by the assessments and audits, with a total available investment of up to \$500 million.

### **Increase Relief to Aid Farmers and Accelerate Repopulation**

APHIS will continue to indemnify producers whose flocks must be depopulated to control the further spread of HPAI.

New programs are being explored to aid farmers to accelerate the rate of repopulation, including ways to simplify the approval process to speed recovery.

Up to \$400 million will be available to support these costs for the remainder of the fiscal year.

### **Remove Unnecessary Regulatory Burdens on the Chicken and Egg Industry to Further Innovation and Reduce Consumer Prices**

USDA is working alongside our partners at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to examine strategies to safely expand supply in the commercial market for eggs.

USDA will minimize burdens on individual farmers and consumers who harvest homegrown eggs.

### **Explore Pathways toward Vaccines, Therapeutics, and Other Strategies for Protecting Egg Laying Chickens to Reduce Instances of Depopulation**

USDA will be hyper-focused on a targeted and thoughtful strategy for potential new generation vaccines, therapeutics, and other innovative solutions to minimize depopulation of egg laying chickens along with increased bio-surveillance and other innovative solutions targeted at egg laying chickens in and around outbreaks. Up to a \$100 million investment will be available for innovation in this area.

Importantly, USDA will work with trading partners to limit impacts to export trade markets from potential vaccination. Additionally, USDA will work alongside the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to ensure the public health and safety of any such approaches include considerations of tradeoffs between public health and infectious disease strategy.

USDA will solicit public input on solutions, and will involve Governors, State Departments of Agriculture, state veterinarians, and poultry and dairy farmers on vaccine and therapeutics strategy, logistics, and surveillance. USDA will immediately begin holding biweekly discussions on this and will also brief the public on its progress biweekly until further notice.

### **Consider Temporary Import-Export Options to Reduce Costs on Consumers and Evaluate International Best Practices**

USDA will explore options for temporarily increasing egg imports and decreasing exports, if applicable, to supplement the domestic supply, subject to safety reviews.

USDA will evaluate international best practices in egg production and safety to determine any opportunities to increase domestic supply. Staff Contact: Steven Fenaroli; [sfenaroli@cfbf.com](mailto:sfenaroli@cfbf.com)

# Christina Beckstead Recognized as a 2025 Woman Leading the Way and Woman of Distinction

Anne Deniz, MCFB

Christina Beckstead, Executive Director of the Madera County Farm Bureau, was recently honored by two California legislators for her exemplary leadership and service to the agricultural community. Assemblywoman Esmeralda Soria named Beckstead one of the 2025 Women Leading the Way in the 27th Assembly District, while Senator Anna M. Caballero recognized her as a Woman of Distinction for Senate District 14.



The prestigious acknowledgments took place during Women’s History Month, with Senator Caballero’s reception held on Friday, March 28, and Assemblywoman Soria’s event following on Saturday, March 29.

“Every year, I am privileged to recognize women throughout Senate District 14 who have made significant contributions to their communities,” said Senator Caballero. “I am continually inspired by the caliber of women whose dedication makes a real difference in the lives of others... Our communities are enriched because of their service.”

Assemblywoman Soria echoed similar sentiments on her website, stating that her “Women Leading the Way” awards are designed to honor women providing outstanding service in their communities during Women’s History Month.

For nearly a decade, Christina Beckstead has led the Madera County Farm Bureau with determination, vision, and a deep-rooted passion for agriculture. Raised on a dairy in El Nido, Beckstead’s agricultural journey began in her youth through 4-H, FFA and continued at Fresno State, where she was active in the agricultural department and a proud member of the professional ag sorority, Sigma Alpha.

Her leadership has made a lasting impact not only in Madera County but also throughout the Central Valley and the state of California. From tackling the complexities of SGMA and the High-Speed Rail Project to championing scholarship opportunities for local youth, Beckstead’s advocacy has been both tireless and transformative.

“Christina is extraordinary, tenacious, and deeply committed to agriculture,” shared a colleague. “She doesn’t just represent agriculture—she lives it, breathes it, and fiercely protects it.”

Beckstead is a respected figure in numerous local and statewide coalitions and boards, including the East San Joaquin Water Quality Coalition, Madera Ag Water Association, Water Blueprint for the San Joaquin Valley, and more. Her involvement has been critical in shaping balanced water policy and championing property rights and sustainable agricultural practices.

She has been instrumental in founding and leading several organizations and programs aimed at improving water quality, supporting nitrate control programs, and addressing the vital issue of clean drinking water in rural communities. Known for her solution-oriented approach, Beckstead consistently pushes for progress while fostering collaboration among farmers, environmental advocates, and policy makers.

A strong advocate for agricultural youth, Beckstead has helped award over \$704,000 in scholarships to 132 students through MCFB since her arrival. In 2020, amid the pandemic, she played a pivotal role in organizing the virtual/hybrid junior livestock auction, ensuring 4-H and FFA exhibitors from the Chowchilla Fair could still participate and benefit. She also led the reinstatement of the Fresno Madera Young Farmers & Ranchers chapter in 2018, helping to cultivate the next generation of agricultural leaders.

“Christina’s influence goes beyond advocacy—she nurtures and inspires the future of agriculture,” said a fellow Farm Bureau member. “Her leadership is forward-thinking, inclusive, and grounded in a true love for this industry.”

In a world where agriculture is constantly challenged by regulation, environmental concerns, and market instability, Christina Beckstead stands out as a bold, bipartisan leader. She brings people together, finds common ground, and never loses sight of the bigger picture: a thriving, resilient future for California agriculture.

Her community is proud to celebrate these well-earned recognitions from Assemblywoman Soria and Senator Caballero. Beckstead’s legacy is one of unwavering service, powerful leadership, and heartfelt commitment.

Madera County—and all of California agriculture—is better because of her.



# MCFB Member Highlight

## Mr. James Chew

In the heart of Madera County, you'll find James Chew—a man whose journey to farming is as rich and layered as the soil.

Raised in the small town of Stevenson, California, Chew's agricultural roots run deep. As a student at Stevenson Elementary and later Hilmar High School, he was immersed early in the hands-on world of farming through both 4-H and FFA. His father owned beef cattle and operated a hay hauling business that served dairies throughout the region. For young James, weekends and afternoons weren't for cartoons—they were for loading hay and learning firsthand the value of sweat-earned work.

Chew's passion for agriculture blossomed at Modesto Junior College, where he earned an Associate of Science in Plant and Animal Sciences and worked at both the beef and swine units. But his education didn't stop in the classroom—or even the Central Valley. Driven by a deep desire to serve and teach, Chew joined the Peace Corps, spending two life-changing years in Botswana educating local farmers in modern agriculture techniques.

That experience sparked an international journey that took him across Swaziland, through the African continent to Egypt, and even into Europe. But no matter where he was in the world, Chew's heart remained rooted in agriculture. Returning stateside, he pursued a Bachelor's in Plant and Animal Sciences at Fresno State—again balancing books and barns while working at the university's beef and swine units.

Chew's calling to teach agriculture wasn't finished. He served as a missionary in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, again teaching ag practices to communities eager to learn and grow. Later, he worked at a hatchery before an unexpected pivot took him to the Bay Area, where he earned an engineering degree in San Francisco and spent two decades as a city engineer for Richmond.

But the land always called him back.

After saving diligently during his engineering career, Chew returned to his roots—this time in Madera County—where he purchased his own farmland and began living out his lifelong dream: being a farmer. He now grows pistachios and sells them to a processor in Terra Bella. While the work is tough, Chew says, he loves it, which makes it not really like work at

He's found not just a farm, but a community. "The farmers here are like brothers. If someone's down, the others show up. That's just how it is," Chew says. Beyond the fields, he's also found a spiritual home in Chowchilla, where he attends church and weekly Bible studies—often alongside fellow farmers.

Chew credits much of his ability to achieve this dream to the unwavering support of his wife.

When he's not tending to trees, Chew indulges in a few simple pleasures—attending ag equipment auctions (even if he's just browsing), visiting sheep auctions in Dos Palos, and enjoying daily walks with his loyal dogs.

And as a proud member of the Madera County Farm Bureau, Chew is quick to point out just how critical the organization is to local agriculture.

"MCFB is solid. Real. Helpful. They don't just talk; they show up. They help with everything from navigating permits and licenses, to trainings, legislation updates, fighting water issues, even grant applications for disadvantaged farmers," he explains. "It's like that old saying: the quality of pudding isn't just in the look—it's in the taste. And MCFB delivers." Chew also finds the farm bureau a place to also stay social, and that keeps the farmers together saying, "It is great to see one another every year at the Ag United Event."







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# See Page 4 for membership benefits!

