

Celebrating West Side
AG & DAIRY

A Special Supplement to the West Side Index & Gusting Press-Standard
Thursday, March 18, 2021

Cover photo by Kyle Souza

Coordinator keeps tomatoes flowing into local processing plant

The tomatoes that find their way into countless sauces, condiments and other uses are a common commodity in the farming circles of Merced and Stanislaus counties.

Orchestrating the process that takes tomatoes from planting to harvest and through the processing process at local canneries is an art which must be mastered to keep the chain flowing smoothly during the harvest season.

At Ingomar Packing Company between Gustine and Los Banos, much of that responsibility falls to Steven Garcia, who was recently named field coordinator for the grower-owned company.

He started with Ingomar nearly three years ago as a field representative, and quickly learned the ropes of the industry.

"I was given an opportunity and have just been learning a lot over the last few years. My boss has been a great mentor and teacher," Garcia told Matos Newspapers.

In that role, Garcia works closely with the company's growers to map out a strategy to fulfill the pack plan developed each year by the company's production team.

"My boss (Tom Lima, director of field operations) and I will get the spec sheet for the pack plan and come up with a game plan of which varieties would be best to hit the specifications," Garcia explained. "There are variety guidebooks that we use, and we watch many trials during the previous season to see the up and coming varieties. We pick the varieties that are going

to be best for us and best for the growers."

Growers are advised of what varieties they should be planting and when, and are given a harvest schedule.

The growers are responsible for the crop production from acquisition of the transplants through harvest, Garcia said, although field reps will be checking in regularly during the harvest season to gauge the timing of crop maturity and scheduling loads for delivery to the plant accordingly.

While there are harvest targets, Garcia noted, some degree of flexibility is essential as well.

"Mother Nature definitely dictates when a field is



Steven Garcia is the field coordinator for Ingomar Packing Company.

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INGOMAR

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

going to be ready. On paper we can show (a specific date), but that is just going off the numbers," he told Mattos Newspapers. "At the end of the day you have to do your maturity checks during the last month to see where your first fields are at and when they are going to be ready. If something is not ready (on schedule), we will find another field that came a little earlier than anticipated. That is part of our job, to make sure that we keep that plant fed with fruit."

Freshness is a key ingredient in product quality, he emphasized.

Garcia said that no more than five to six hours elapse from the time tomatoes are harvested until they are processed.

There is a degree of flexibility in that some varieties are considered to be suited for extended field storage.....meaning that they can stay in the field while mature longer than other varieties and still maintain freshness.

Ingomar Packing has 25-30 grower members from Kettleman City to Stockton, and this year will process the tomato harvest from around 27,000 acres. About 900 acres will be grown organically, Garcia noted.

Garcia said the company takes the approach of starting transplants among their southernmost growers and working northward. Plants start going into the ground in late February or early March. The same south-to-north approach applies when the three-month harvest season begins in July.....during which time the plant is running 24/7.

"We try to keep transportation centralized and move it all together," he explained. "If you have some in the north and some in the south, then you have your transportation all spread out."

Most of the tomatoes that come into the Ingomar plant are processed into tomato paste, although a small portion are packed as diced tomatoes.

Garcia said he breaks tomato varieties into three categories - thin, mid-range or thick. The dif-

ferent varieties are best suited for different types of end products.

A customer wanting a product for, say, a tomato juice would require a thin tomato. Another may require a thicker tomato paste for a different end product.

The company, he said, places an emphasis on providing a high quality product while also looking after the needs of its growers.

"Ingomar prides itself on being in favor of the grower. If the grower succeeds, we succeed," Garcia commented. "We are trying to give them the best varieties from a yield standpoint, and economically, to give us a high quality fruit to run more efficiently and produce a great product."

Garcia said he has found a niche with the company.

"I really enjoy it. Ingomar gave me a chance three years ago, and it has been very satisfying to be part of the team here," he reflected. "It is a great group of people to work with, and I like the fact that my job is providing food for people."

Almonds, milk remain top Stanislaus County commodities

Almonds and milk retained their top rankings among Stanislaus County agricultural commodities in 2019.

The overall value of farm commodities inched upward in 2019, according to the annual report issued by Stanislaus County Agricultural Commissioner Milton O'Haire. The 2019 report is the most recent available.

Stanislaus County farmers and ranchers produced commodities valued at nearly \$3.6 billion, an increase of 1 percent over the 2018 value of \$3.57 billion.

The county's record-

high production came in 2014, when commodity values hit \$4.4 billion.

Almonds continued to be the county's dominant crop in 2019, with production of \$1.2 billion accounting for 34 percent of the county's ag values. The 2019 value of almonds produced in Stanislaus County increased by \$121 million as 20,000 new acres came into production.

Following are the county's top 10 agricultural commodities in 2019. The 2018 ranking is in

- 1) Almonds, \$1.2 billion
- 2) Milk, \$628.7 million
- 3) Chickens, \$365.8 million

4) Cattle and calves, \$198.5 million

5) Nursery, fruit and nut trees and vines, \$175.3 million

6) Silage, \$137 million

7) Walnuts, \$122.5 million

8) Almond pollination, \$83.9 million

9) Turkeys, \$60.9 million

10) Melons, \$51.5 million

Stanislaus County farmers and ranchers exported products to 112 countries in 2019. The report reflects the gross values of agricultural commodities and does not reflect production costs or profits.



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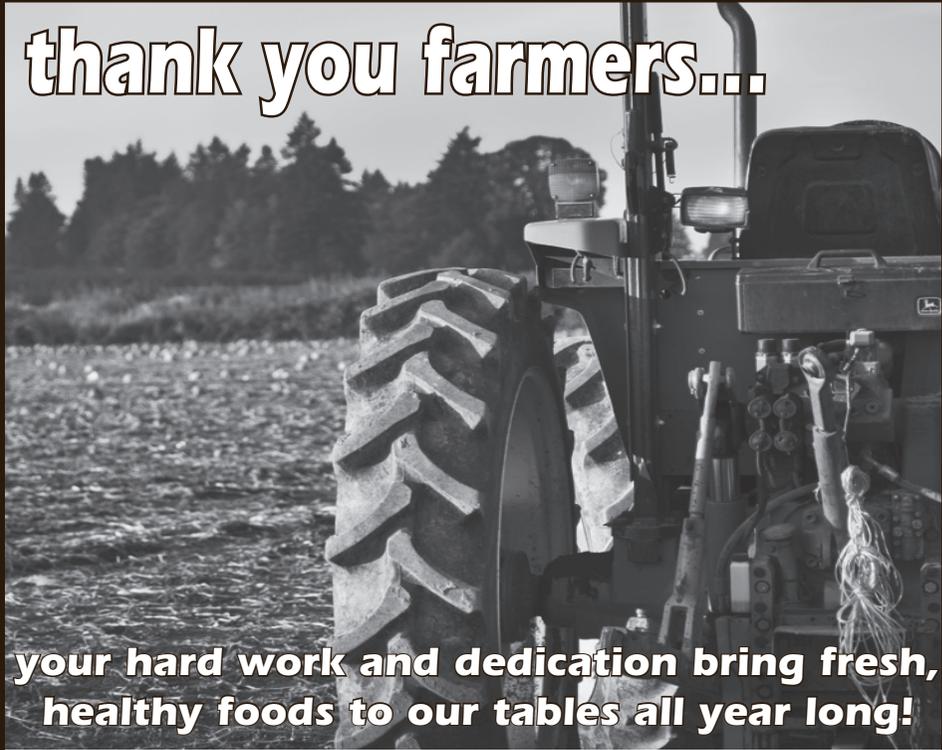
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Some dairy producers flourish, others struggle under new federal pricing structure

California's shift to the federal milk marketing order and volatile economic challenges within the dairy industry have created a landscape in which some producers are thriving while others fight for survival.

For producers on the front lines of the dairy industry, those whose milk flows from the farm into the production lines for cheese, fluid milk, butter and other products, the financial outlook hinges largely on the end product.

Under a system which now ties prices largely to end product pricing rather than pool pricing all milk, producers who ship their milk to plants which produce cheese are receiving significantly higher prices than those whose milk goes to butter and powder production.

The difference, Western United Dairies CEO Anja Raudabaugh recently told Mattos Newspapers, is



Cattle lined up to feed on a West Side dairy recently. Producers are facing a number of challenges this spring, including high feed costs and disparity in their returns from processors.

See DAIRY | PAGE 5



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DAIRY

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stark.

“I have some dairy producers who year over year have been having the best year of their entire career,” Raudabaugh explained. “Half of my members are absolutely having the best year they have ever seen.”

But others, she said, are facing existential challenges.

“It has not been unusual for (a producer) to be making 50 percent less than their neighbor right now,” said Raudabaugh.

She estimated that the average pay to a dairy producer shipping to a cheese plant is more than \$20 per 100 pounds of milk, while the average for a producer shipping to a butter/powder plant is in the range of \$11 to \$12.

The average break-even cost for a California dairy producer, Raudabaugh said, falls in the \$16 to \$17 range.

The state’s dairy producers entered into the federal milk marketing order in 2018, she said, drastically changing the pricing structure.

Without diving too deep-

ly into the complexities of the milk pricing system, Raudabaugh explained that “broadly speaking, all milk was pooled and the average price was paid out to producers. Everybody basically got paid the same” under the previous structure.

Under the federal order, processors have more flexibility in how they pay their producers, and the format has largely shifted to an end product pricing system.

“Cheese plants have paid their producers what they have reaped off the market. The market for cheese has been good,” Raudabaugh explained.

At the other end of the spectrum, though, are the butter/powder processors. While butter has long been a “golden” dairy commodity, she said, its dry milk powder by-product is at the lowest rung on the pricing scale of dairy products.

“The producer who is making milk for a butter/powder plant gets the average of those two products,” Raudabaugh stated.

Cooperatives which have processing capability for both Class III (cheese) and Class IV (butter/powder) plants have the flexibility to

pool or de-pool all or part of their milk, she noted, which maximizes the plant’s ability to make a profitable product for its farmers.

“The synopsis is that in California our producers’ ability to survive in the future depends on how well their processor plays the pool game. If they are really adept at it, they will have a competitive edge.”

Other financial challenges have also come into play.

The cost of feed has skyrocketed in the past year, she noted, and has been exacerbated by dry conditions in California which have limited the ability of Golden State producers to grow their own commodities.

“Feed prices have been terrible,” Raudabaugh remarked. “If you didn’t have your feed hedged and were trying to buy rolled corn on the market you paid mightily for that.”

Labor costs are also a concern, particularly in the local market where dairy producers are competing with other employers for workers.

Dairy producers in some areas, she said, are paying \$18 to \$20 an hour to hire employees “be-

cause they are right next door to urban construction projects” competing for labor.

Some processors have reportedly taken measures to enforce limits or asking producers to cut back the amount of milk they are shipping.

“Mostly what I hear is that cooperatives are simply trying to enforce their base with members,” she explained. But, Raudabaugh noted, she has also heard reports that two private processors have asked for milk cutbacks from their shippers, one last April and another recently.

While demand for dairy products remains strong, she said, “right now across the United States there is a massive over-supply of milk being produced. In California the numbers are not quite as stark, but we are probably producing 2-3 percent more year over year.”

While California is fortunate to have a very high manufacturing capacity, Raudabaugh said, if the rest of the nation is overflowing with milk it is only a matter of time before California is impacted.

Creameries, she explained, must strike a balance to avoid creating

a surplus of high-value commodities such as cheese and butter, which would ultimately diminish returns to producers. “Processing milk for higher value products is one pressure point - (which) combined with contracting the supply of that higher value product creates a better balance for farmers,” Raudabaugh explained.

Pandemic relief funds were crucial in helping struggling dairy producers survive the past year, Raudabaugh said. She encouraged those who could to invest those funds into strengthening their operations through measures such as hedging feed costs and base milk prices. For others, the payments went directly to staying afloat.

“The payments have been put to good use. People who didn’t really need the money, I’ve seen reinvest to prevent disaster later. It wasn’t necessarily needed in half the cases, but the other half used it to buy feed,” Raudabaugh commented. “It has been the only thing preventing bankruptcy in a lot of cases.”

Increasingly, Raudabaugh added, she is encouraging producers to lock in as many of their

costs as possible through hedging.

The current situation, she told Mattos Newspapers, is not sustainable for producers who are shipping to butter/powder plants.

“Dairymen in California are used to having a good year, a bad year, a good year a bad year. They went to the federal order because they wanted to see stability. That is not going to happen,” Raudabaugh said. “In the past, everybody was on the same playing field. If you were a producer you knew what you were going to make your neighbor was going to make the same. Now there are winners and losers.”

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Ag water allocations curtailed after dry winter

Some West Side growers to receive only 5 percent allocation

West Side growers will face water challenges once again this year in the wake of a dry winter.

Those in the Del Puerto Water District, which stretches along the Inter-

state 5 corridor from Santa Nella to Vernalis, face the most dire situation after being allocated only 5 percent of a full supply of surface irrigation water delivered through the Central Valley Project.

The Central California Irrigation District (CCID), which enjoys stronger water rights than the federal Del Puerto district, will receive 75 percent its

contracted supply under the "critical" water year declaration issued by the Bureau of Reclamation in late February.

Farmers in the Del Puerto district are all too familiar with the challenges of steeply curtailed water allocations, reflected Anthea Hansen, the district's general manager.

She told Mattos News-

papers that the low allocation did not come as a surprise.

"It was not unexpected. A lot of it is truly due to the hydrology this year. We were prepared for the news," Hansen commented.

Hansen said a 5 percent allocation of surface water represents about two inches per acre.

To put that into per-

spective, she explained, almonds - a primary crop in the district - require 36 inches or more of water each year.

The district will once again cobble together a variety of water sources to provide as much water as possible, Hansen said.

For starters, she explained, an equivalent of about a 10 percent allocation or about four inches

per acre, carries over in storage and will be available for use.

The district will also draw on the innovative projects it has launched in recent years to supplement its surface water allocations.

A recycling project which delivers treated

See WATER | PAGE 8



The Central California Irrigation District Main Canal delivers water to growers from Mendota to Crows Landing. Barring late developments, however, water will be in shorter supply for CCID growers as the district has been designated to be in a "critical" water year and will receive 75 percent of its normal allocation. Growers in federal districts such as the Del Puerto Water District, are expecting only a 5 percent allocation of their water supply this year.

WATER

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

wastewater from the cities of Modesto and Turlock to use on fields and orchards in the district will provide about six inches per acre this year, Hansen said, and water banked in groundwater storage could provide another three or four inches.

Some growers have wells, Hansen added, although that safety net is not without its drawbacks.

"Quite a few wells went in during the last drought," she explained, "but that is problematic when the groundwater is insufficient in quantity and quality. Our surface water is

very high quality."

The district is also working with growers who do not use their allocated water.

"There are a handful of small growers who don't actively farm their parcels. We are making sure that water can get back to other users," Hansen stated.

She will also seek out water for purchase on the open market, Hansen said, but believes those supplies will also be fairly limited.

Hansen said some of the district's 43,000 acres in cultivation will be idled again this year as growers concentrate their available water on fewer acres.

Last year, Hansen said, about 9,000 acres were left

fallow in the district....and that was with a 20 percent water allocation.

The district's farmers are no strangers to water shortages, Hansen reflected, and have proven resilient.

"We are well versed on how to do this, unfortunately," she commented. "We will make it through."

Central California Irrigation District

Growers in the CCID, which stretches from Mendota to Crows Landing, benefit from the district's long-standing senior water rights and San Joaquin River exchange contract.

But they, too, will be asked to make do with less surface water this year.

Jarrett Martin, the dis-

trict's general manager, said the "critical" year designation and 25 percent reduction means that growers will receive 2.5 acre-feet per acre of Tier 1 surface water. Another six inches of Tier 2 water are available to growers through well sources, he said, bringing the allocation to 36 inches.

"There are quite a few crops out there that can get by with three acre-feet, but some are more intensive," Martin commented. "Almonds typically take more than three acre-feet to grow a productive crop."

A supplemental pool program allows the opportunity for growers to request more water, Martin

noted.

"Our growers can sign up and let us know that they need water in addition to their allocation. The district will take the requests and will be simultaneously working to secure that amount of water," he explained. "We are doing everything we can to meet the needs of our growers. Our goal every year is to meet the needs of all of our growers."

Many CCID growers have their own wells and can volunteer to pump water for the supplemental water program as well as to help meet their own needs.

"CCID growers are visionaries," Martin remarked. "For their own se-

curity and flexibility, a lot of them have historically had a backup well on site."

While strong storms in March and into April are always possible, neither Martin or Hansen expressed optimism about the prospects of their allocation increasing.

"Where we stand right now, there is a big hole to climb out of," Martin stated in late February. "It is not prudent to plan for the best case scenario, so we are fully looking at this year through the lens of increasing flexibility for our growers and to try to maximize opportunities for our district and growers to meet the shortfall of the critical year."

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Voluntary agreements on rivers waters essential, yet remain elusive

Sasquatch? Loch Ness Monster? The voluntary agreements on preserving and sharing the San Joaquin Valley's rivers?

If you believe in imaginary creatures, you're likely to also believe the voluntary agreements we've been working so hard to achieve might still happen. But for a lot of us involved in the process, it's getting more difficult to believe.

The people of the Northern San Joaquin Valley have offered to provide twice as much water to help fish survive. We've invested millions in restoring river habitat - sometimes doing the work with their own hands. We've given up hundreds of acres of cropland to plant native trees and shrubs, then watched proudly as those acres flooded and created food and cover for baby salmon.

We've spent more millions for scientists to study the life cycles of salmon, rainbow trout and steelhead. We know more about these native fish now than at any other time in history.

No matter how much we've done, it hasn't been enough to get a voluntary agreement.

The push for a deal began in 2017 when people from our communities answered the call from governors Jerry Brown and Gavin Newsom to begin serious negotiations. They knew, as did we, that an agreement to share water and save fish would stand a better chance to succeed than a half-baked solution decreed by the state.

By early 2018, we had



ADAM GRAY

forged a deal on the Tuolumne River. It would double the water used for salmon migrations. With the City of San Francisco, we agreed to spend more than \$30 million to restore habitat and create floodplains where our studies prove baby salmon thrive.

We had similar plans for the Merced and Stanislaus rivers based on current science - not the decades-old studies found in the outdated Bay-Delta Plan. Through these studies - carried out by top scientists from across California - we learned habitat improvement and predator suppression were the key to our success.

Embraced by the Department of Water Resources and crafted by the director of the Department of Fish and Wildlife, among others, the Tuolumne River plan was presented to the State Water Resources Control Board in January 2018.

Instead of celebrating a breakthrough success, a Water Board dominated by intransigent environmentalists rejected it, 4-1. Two even high-fived on the dais after the vote.

Since that moment, it has been difficult to find anyone who believes in this process. Why should they? Every time we meet, the goalposts have been moved. There are new demands for more water,

colder water, control of releases from a dam my constituents built. This isn't about saving salmon; it's about more water.

I've never seen Sasquatch, but I believe there's still time to reach a voluntary agreement. But before we go back to the table, we need to believe there's a real possibility for success.

The governor has an open seat on the Water Board. Why not fill it with someone from the Central Valley? Someone who understands the reality of our world.

Forecasters say we're headed for a second dry year. Farmers have already chosen what crops to plant and which fields to fallow. Others merely hope to get enough water to keep their trees and vines alive.

California's food producers - farmers, farm workers and those in food-processing facilities - came through during the pandemic. They did their jobs, often without even getting a face mask from the state. Because of their sacrifices, there were no shortages of food on our tables.

We can save their jobs and their family farms. We can save salmon, too. And we can make sure Californians don't have to import food grown under sketchy sanitation standards.

All that's required is a belief that we can succeed.

Adam Gray represents the 21st Assembly District which includes all of Merced and part of Stanislaus County.

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Organic grower finds niche at farmer's markets

GUSTINE - A local family farming operation has found its niche in growing organic produce for farmer's markets in the San Joaquin Valley and Bay Area.

Ledesma Family Farms, which grows on a total of about 90 acres of land in Gustine, Hollister and Watsonville, sells at more than two dozen markets each week during the peak of the season and grows more than 100 fruits and vegetables.

Isaac Ledesma, who currently oversees the farming operation, said his father Javier Ledesma made the switch to organics in the mid-1980s.

The farmer's market circuit, Ledesma explained, fits the operation's scale and crop diversity.

"We used to do wholesale, but there was no mon-

ey in it," he told Mattos Newspapers. "We would need twice as much land as we have to make it profitable."

Growers in the wholesale market tend to be focused on producing large quantities of a single commodity.

Ledesma will still sell on the wholesale market if he has an oversupply of a specific products, he explained, but the focus of the business is growing for farmer's markets.

And the vast majority of produce coming off the family farm is organic. Produce from the edges of the Ledesma properties which abut conventional farming operations are marketed as conventional produce, he said, simply as

See LEDESMA | PAGE 11



Ledesma Family Farms grows a variety of fresh organic produce for sale at farmer's markets in the valley and Bay Area. Pictured is Isaac Ledesma, who oversees the operation.

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LEDESMA

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a precaution.

The produce coming from the fields of Ledesma Family Farms spans the agricultural alphabet.... carrots, beets, greens, broccoli, cauliflower, heirloom tomatoes, melons, peas, squash, cilantro, radishes, onions, garlic....the list goes on and on.

"There is nothing we don't grow," said Ledesma.

As an organic grower, Ledesma explained, he uses only certified, natural products such as a fish-based fertilizer which is a staple of the operation.

The process is labor intensive, in part because of the diversity of the crops involved.

"We harvest almost entirely by hand," Ledesma said. "We grow over 100 crops. How can I have over 100 machines here?"

Ledesma said the produce he takes to market is typically that which has been harvested the previous day - although those which store well, such as carrots, may have been picked two days earlier.

The timing, he noted, is simply a matter of logistics.

"We leave here before dawn," he said of market days (which during a busy season can be every day of the week other than Monday). "You have to harvest it, wash it, pack it and distribute it to different farmer's markets in different vehicles."

Markets are somewhat seasonal, Ledesma said, with some operating only during the spring and summer months while others go year-round.

"We usually try to keep it year-round, but this year we stopped for a while," he

See LEDESMA | PAGE 12



More than 100 different produce crops are grown by Ledesma Family Farms, which is a vendor at more than two dozen farmer's markets each week during peak seasons. Isaac Ledesma, who grew up in the business, supervises the operation.

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LEDESMA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

stated. "If there is demand, we will go open up as many as we can. It is not a problem planting and harvesting; it is hard to find people you can count on to go sell."

The challenges of the pandemic have been many. At the markets, for example, Ledesma said he was required for a time to increase the staffing because more people were shopping for produce and only employees were allowed to handle the vegetables.

"Everything was handed out. People could not just grab their items," he commented.

One consequence of the pandemic, Ledesma remarked, is a growing awareness of the challenges faced by growers.

"A lot of people have started growing their own items," he pointed out. "They realize that it is not easy. What I have seen is that people are a little more aware of how things work on a farm."

Those who go into gardening thinking that every plant will produce picture-perfect vegetables quickly learn otherwise, he stated.

"Most things have 30 percent to 40 percent that do not develop to be

anything," Ledesma said. "Some crops you might have about an 80 percent harvest.....cauliflower might be 50 percent."

The family has given back to the community during the pandemic by donating excess produce to be included in the food distributions organized by Zachery Ramos.

"In the beginning of the pandemic we had a lot of stuff left over. You can't use it again, so I contacted Zachery and started giving it out through him," Ledesma said. "We were doing it weekly, and still do occasionally."

Ledesma has learned the business from the ground up.

He worked his first farmer's market alone at around 8 years of age. While attending Gustine High, Ledesma said, he would go to school until noon and then come home to work on the family farms into the evening.

"There was plenty of work," recalled the 2013 GHS graduate, who has supervised the farming operation for about six years.

"I grew up in this. I like it," Ledesma reflected. "That is the reason I am here. As long as you like something with a passion, you can be successful."

SustainiBeef directly delivers high-quality meat to its customers

GUSTINE - For four generations, the Lopes family name has been synonymous with the West Side dairy industry.

Now the family is branching out with a new endeavor focused on bringing high-quality beef, raised using environmentally sustainable methods, to the tables of its customers.

Tony Lopes launched the brand, called sustainiBeef, in April 2020 with a business model centered largely on distribution of 10-pound beef boxes - primarily on a subscription basis.

Lopes said the genesis for the beef program was the family's decision to introduce Angus genetics into the breeding program of its Holstein herd about four years ago.

In addition to improving the quality of the overall herd, he explained, the new genetics produced a higher quality of meat among the steers bound for feedlots.



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Tony Lopes has started the sustainiBeef enterprise on the family's dairy, feeding out select steers to provide high-quality beef to subscribers.

See LOPES | PAGE 13

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LOPES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

"Those animals have more value to the beef industry because of their Angus (genetics)," Lopes told Mattos Newspapers. "We had 500 to 700 pound feeders that we were selling to other buyers. We decided to raise a few and harvest them ourselves. We were impressed by the taste of the meat and the tenderness."

Adding to the appeal, Lopes said, was that the steers could be raised in an environmentally sustainable manner.

"My family has always placed a high priority on stewardship and the way we care for the land, the cattle and the environment around us," he commented. "Through some of my other work and involvement, I became aware of research out of UC Davis that indicated that with this particular sourcing of beef through Holstein herds these cattle could make it to the end consumer with a pretty sizable difference in overall emissions."

"With these steers and the ability to create a high-quality dining experience, as well as the research-backed sustainability of what we do," he continued, "there is a potential for this to be a product that fills a niche in the market with a local, affordable product that was produced in an environmentally conscious way."

Lopes said he selects about eight to 10 steers each month to finish out in the sustainiBeef program. If the demand or processing capacity does not materialize, he stated, the steers will be sold in the traditional market.

One distinct advantage, he explained, is the ability to hand-pick the steers which will be kept on the farm. Once selected, the steers can be raised with attention to the individual

animals.

"We are raising animals on an individual basis as opposed to in a lot, so we can tailor that program to exactly what customers want," Lopes stated.

The cattle are fed a ration formulated by a nutritionist.

"He is taking into account all their nutritional needs, first and foremost to ensure that they will be healthy, and secondarily that they will perform efficiently," Lopes told Mattos Newspapers. "They are not grass-fed, however, they receive quite a bit more forage than traditional feedlot cattle."

The steers are on pasture at times, he noted, but grain is a required component in the process of producing tender, well-marbled steak.

Lopes has his cattle harvested at a Modesto processing facility. The beef is then transported to a family-owned meat locker in Turlock.

"Once it goes through the dry aging process, it is immediately flash-frozen and packed in sealed packaging," he explained.

SustainiBeef launched in the midst of the pandemic.

One related challenge, Lopes said, was the unexpected lack of processing capacity.

"We used to be able to schedule a steer one or two weeks out. Across the state and nation, the wait lists have actually grown to up to a year to get an animal harvested," he stated. "That was a unique market headwind that we did not fully appreciate. You have to get animals into the processor and stay ahead of any customer growth that you have. We have had to harvest when we have processing capacity and wait when we don't."

Lopes said that he was able to get more cattle processed toward the end of 2020, and is continuing to take new subscriptions while serving existing cus-



SustainiBeef subscribers receive high quality beef in 10-pound boxes.

PHOTO SUBMITTED

tomers.

He said, though, that the availability of freezer beef is being pushed back until processing ability is more reliable.

SustainiBeef products are delivered in 10-pound boxes, either on an individual purchase or subscriber basis. Each box typically includes two to three pounds of primal cut steaks, two to three pounds of specialty roasts and rib cuts, as well as four to five pounds of premium ground beef.

"We are more than happy to serve our customers however we can, but

the marketing is more geared toward a subscription box," Lopes explained. Customers can purchase a single box, or can arrange monthly or bi-monthly deliveries.

SustainiBeef has been well-received, Lopes said, and he believes the product fits a market niche.

"We have seen this year that a lot of people want to have more control over the availability of their food, but I think it is part of a trend that has been going on for quite a while," he reflected. "People are realizing that not all food is created equally. People

are taking more interest in how their food is produced."

SustainiBeef has shipped throughout California and to out-of-state consumers, Lopes reported earlier this year.

But many of his customers are fellow West Siders, friends and neighbors with whom he has personal interaction and feedback.

"If your producer is someone you pass on the highway every day, there is an accountability there. As we produce this food we have an opportunity to better understand their needs," Lopes commented.

"In ag we are all very proud of saying that we feed the world, but the overwhelming majority of us don't deliver a gallon of milk directly to the consumer. To stand in the driveway of a family consuming my food and have them tell me that they loved the steak or the hamburger....I find that extremely rewarding, and it is something that they really value too."

To learn more, visit sustainibeef.com or the sustainibeef Facebook page or Instagram.



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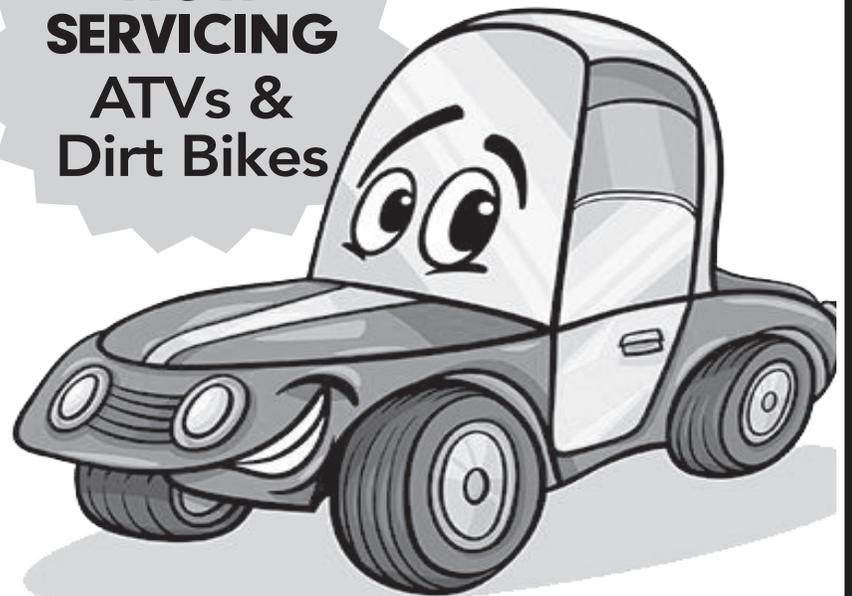
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Toste writing for prominent dairy publication

Gustine High graduate Adriana Toste's dairy involvement and interests have branched out into writing as an intern for one of the nation's leading industry publications.

Toste has written a number of articles for Progressive Dairy magazine, which publishes every three weeks, and for the organization's newsletter.

The 2017 Gustine High graduate is currently finishing up her studies at Oklahoma State University.

"I started writing for them last semester for a class. I did three articles from August to December, and I am interning with them this semester," said Toste.

Toste was raised on a West Side dairy and is familiar with all aspects of the industry.

Producing articles about dairy topics, she reflected, has further piqued her interest in writing as a possible career.

"I have always really enjoyed writing. When I started studying ag communications I realized that it was a passion," said Toste, who is the daughter of John and Sandra Toste. "I wanted to see if it was a viable career for me. I enjoy getting to connect with people and getting to

share their story through my own words."

Toste said her works have included webinar reviews, feature stories on dairy families and unique dairy operations, and more technical, science-based articles on industry topics.

Her favorite, Toste shared, was an article about dairy shows which continued last fall despite the pandemic.

"It really showed the persistence of the dairy industry and how people are very passionate about what they do. They were able to have these shows, even though they were different (due to the pandemic restrictions)," she reflected. "I talked to sources from several states and talked about their experience showing during the COVID era. It touched home."



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Gustine High graduate Adriana Toste, currently a senior at Oklahoma State University, has been writing for Progressive Dairy.

Due to the pandemic, her interviews have been conducted remotely.

Toste said, though, that she looks forward to being able to conduct interviews in person.

"I think one of the greatest parts of the internship has been talking with industry professionals," she

commented. "I can't imagine how it would be in person. That is really how you can make connections."

Toste has been attending college under the hybrid format throughout her senior year.

"Some of my classes are in person; some are on line," she explained. "It just depends on how hands-on the class is. I am on campus three days a week."

She plans to return to California, and said she is open to writing as a career.

"Ultimately, my goal is to do ag communications with an emphasis on dairy," Toste stated. "The Central Valley has many opportunities."

And, she added, given her background, "that is where my heart is."



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Ag labor, water issues of highest priority

The year 2020 was unlike any in our lifetime. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged us in ways we never thought possible. Paired with the prospect of another drought, this year looks to be just as challenging for our ag communities. As a ranking member of the House Agriculture Committee, I remain committed to ensuring they have the resources needed to weather this once in a lifetime crisis: A skilled workforce and reliable water supply.

Last year, Congress passed three relief packages totaling more than \$6 trillion to help families, businesses and unemployed workers suffering from the impacts of the coronavirus. Now, with the arrival of vaccines, hope is finally on the horizon to gain control over this terrible disease. But one group was deserving of more: Farm workers. People who work in the fields, packing sheds and food processing facili-



JIM COSTA

ties should be treated as the essential workers they are. They, together with the rest of American agriculture, put food on America's dinner tables every night.

There are three million farm workers in the United States, the majority of whom are undocumented Latino immigrants. And they are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Last year through record-setting heat, hazardous air quality from wildfires and the risk of catching COVID-19, they showed up every day to do their job. And they continue to do so.

I often say food is a national security issue. Therefore, it is our responsibility

in government to ensure these essential workers have the resources they need to survive through difficult times such as these. I have fought every day through this pandemic to do just that. I've been working with the Biden Administration and Governor Newsom to protect these workers and to increase vaccination supplies in the San Joaquin Valley. As we see our vaccine distributions increase across the state, we must ensure everyone has access to a vaccine that needs it and farm workers, who we have deemed essential, are no exception.

But we can go beyond providing vaccines and protective equipment to ensure our farming communities have a healthy, robust supply of quality labor. We must also provide them a path to legal citizenship. This month, I joined my colleagues to re-introduce the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, a bill that would

provide a path to residency for these hard-working individuals, provided they meet requirements such as proving they have worked in agriculture in the past and will continue to work in agriculture in the future.

Farm workers are part of our communities and are some of the hardest working people I've met. Without them, California agriculture and our local economy could not thrive. They should not work in fear. Providing them a path to legal residency will help stabilize a workforce for farms around the country and alleviate the hardships they have struggled with for years. This bipartisan bill is a monumental step in improving our immigration system and is good for farmers, farm workers and American agriculture.

The issue of water, our most precious resource, is no less complicated or important. Water is the foundation of our valley economy. Farmers need water to feed the world and life becomes near impossible for those who lack clean drinking water. Very soon I will introduce a bill to complete repairs to the Delta-Mendota Canal, the California Aqueduct, and the Friant-Kern Canal - all critical to delivering water supplies to farming communities and residents in the San Joaquin Valley.

The Restore Essential Conveyance Act would provide \$600 million to complete the necessary repairs to restore and increase the resiliency of these canals. Built in the '50s and '60s, we're relying on the investments of our parents and

grandparents for the future sustainability of our state. This is no longer an option. Without immediate repair, the ability to deliver water to our farmers and communities is in jeopardy. This bill is an investment in our future and every day we don't act we lose our most precious commodity.

As a third-generation farmer, I know how important it is to be a strong advocate on behalf of our valley's agriculture communities. It has been my honor and privilege to serve as your congressman and working for the betterment of our ag industry has and will always be my highest priority.

Jim Costa represents California's 16th District in the United States House of Representatives.

Milk remains Merced County's leading ag commodity

Milk remained Merced County's leading agricultural commodity in 2019, according to the annual report issued by Agricultural Commissioner David Robinson.

Overall, the value of agricultural commodities fell by 2.7 percent from 2018.

County farmers and ranchers produced commodities valued at \$3.16 billion in 2019, the most recent year for which an annual report was available. That was down from \$3.3 billion in 2018.

The value of Merced County agricultural commodities has fallen each

year since reaching a record-setting \$4.4 billion in 2014.

Merced County producers exported commodities to more than 80 nations in 2019, the report indicates.

The report represents gross returns to the producer and do not reflect production costs or profits.

Following are the county's top 15 commodities in 2019.

- 1) Milk, \$905.1 million
- 2) Almonds, \$421.2 million
- 3) Cattle and calves, \$297.4 million
- 4) Chickens, \$294.6 million
- 5) Sweet potatoes, \$234.9

million

- 6) Tomatoes, \$126.8 million
- 7) Corn silage, \$108 million
- 8) Nursery products, \$84.5 million
- 9) Alfalfa hay, \$69.9 million
- 10) Chicken eggs, \$64.7 million
- 11) Miscellaneous vegetables, \$60.7 million
- 12) Wine grapes, \$56.7 million
- 13) Cotton (Pima), \$45.8 million
- 14) Turkeys, \$43.5 million
- 15) Pollination, \$41.2 million

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How Congress can help Central Valley agriculture

Almost 200 years ago, my great-grandfather moved to the Central Valley to grow peaches in Manteca. When I got elected to Congress four generations later, one of my very first priorities was getting on the Agriculture Committee so I could support the industry that brought my family home. Now that I'm here, I'm fighting for our farmers and our farm workers every single day.

A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the rest of the nation has learned something that we in the Valley have known all along: That our ag and food workers are truly essential workers. It's impossible to imagine a worldwide food chain that doesn't rely on our farmers and the fruits and nuts eaten in every corner of the 50 states and around the globe. Despite this fact, we've seen the pandemic hit our ag community incredibly hard. In



JOSH HARDER

fact, folks working in food and ag are almost twice as likely to die from the disease as your average working adult.

When the pandemic hit, we saw the damage it would cause our farmers and farm workers, so we immediately got to work advocating for our community. First, we saw the White House putting together a special task force on the pandemic, so we made sure someone from agriculture would be there to be a voice for our Valley. Next, we saw farmers and agricultural businesses being left out of our small business relief, so we made sure the federal government rec-

ognized that small farmers are small businesses and got them the help they deserved. Then, we saw our specialty fruit and nut producers struggling as the pandemic crushed demand, so we urged the USDA to use every purchasing power they had to help our folks stay in business. Finally, we saw the state putting together a list of eligible participants to get the vaccine, so we made sure that the state considered all agricultural workers a top priority, making them eligible for the vaccine in the next few weeks.

Soon enough we'll have this pandemic behind us, so I'm working on a few major projects right now to set our Central Valley ag industry up for long-term success.

Labor supply is one of the top issues that I hear about from farmers all the time. This was true even before the pandemic, but the impacts to our

supply chain have made the need for a consistent and safe workforce a top priority. That's why I'm working with Democrats and Republicans on a new bill which will help our farmers secure the labor force they need and help our farm workers achieve a path to citizenship. The bill has support on both sides of the aisle, and I am working around the clock with ag and labor groups to get it across the finish line.

I know that water is always on the minds of everyone in the Valley, and that's even more true for our ag industry. Last Congress, I secured \$14 million in federal funding for new and existing water projects across our community, and I'm just getting started. It's time

the federal government stepped up to get us the resources we need to deliver storage and transportation capacity for all our farmers, especially in the face of water shortages.

And I know many of you have contacted me and my office about the issues at some of our ports. Our district is home to lots of commodities that are distributed all over the country and all over the world. Unfortunately, I've heard growing concerns about our agricultural commodities not being exported. It's alarming that to hear about empty containers being shipped from our ports and producers being left out to dry. I'm working with my colleagues to track this issue closely and will be staying in touch with the Federal Maritime

Commission to make sure we're getting up to date information on their investigation. We grow the best food in the world, and I'm going to make sure the world gets to enjoy it.

Last year, Stanislaus County alone produced more than \$3.5 billion in agricultural commodities. We here in the Valley are feeding families across the country and around the world. It's time we had a voice in Congress fighting for our farmers and our farm workers. I'm proud of the work we've done in my short two years in office, and my promise to you is I'll keep fighting for you every single day.

Josh Harder represents the 10th District of California in the United States House of Representatives

Be a positive voice for agriculture

What a difference a year makes! Last year during this time I had the opportunity to tell you of our upcoming annual meeting. Little did I know that a week after submitting the article, we would be making the decision to postpone our event and watching Governor Newsom shut down the state soon after.

The world has had to grapple with immeasurable losses during this time. Thankfully, agriculture has continued to step up although not without having to change course along the way and challenges to overcome.

The efforts of our com-



BREANNE RAMOS

munity have not been forgotten; however, one must remember to take every moment to educate as much as you can. Agriculture education is something that is still lacking and will continue to do so unless we as a community take a stand and support one another.

If you are one who takes to social media often, engage with people but do so

in a way that does not create ill will but builds relationships in a trusting manner. If you prefer to have one-on-one conversations, answer those difficult discussions when friends and family ask.

Those conversations must be had if we are to move forward and create genuine trust in agriculture.

It could be worse for you – you could be with me at a restaurant where I overhear an incorrect statement made about agriculture. When this happens, I try to politely insert myself into their con-

See RAMOS | PAGE 18

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RAMOS

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versation. My fiancé, who is also involved in agriculture, has learned to tolerate this and tends to now play along when needed.

Agriculture is a proud community whose members get up each day and manage to deal with the highs and lows of farming, while at the

same time producing various products that make the world run.

It is time that our society, who is far removed from agriculture, understands the needs and complications of our community and takes those into consideration.

This is not to say we will not have our battles; we will continue to do so, however we are at a point where the pendulum must soon swing

our way.

Breanne Ramos is the executive director of Merced County Farm Bureau, a non-profit, grassroots, non-governmental organization that advocates for farmers, ranchers and dairy families that live and/or work in Merced County. She can be reached at (209)723-3001 or by email at bramos@mercedfarmbureau.org.



KYLE SOUZA/MATTOS NEWSPAPERS

Bees went about their work of pollinating almond trees in West Side orchards throughout the recent bloom.

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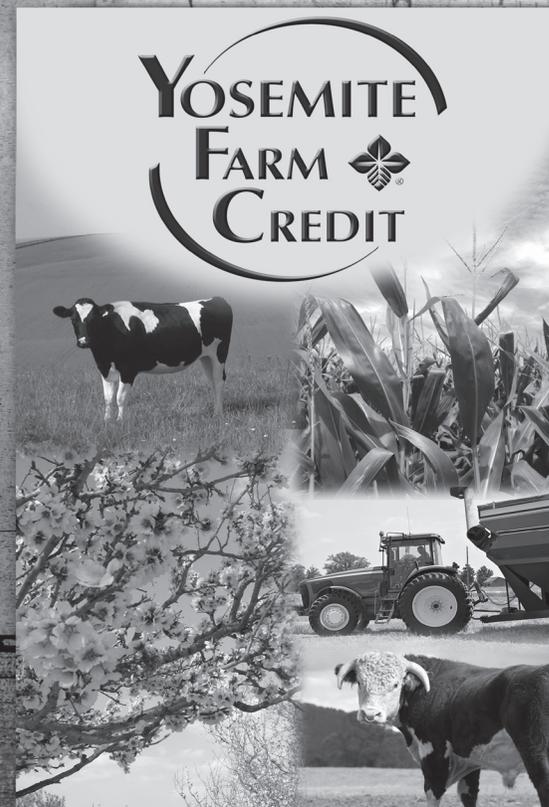
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Groundwater recharge project will bank water for future use

NEWMAN - Two local water agencies are moving forward with plans to fully develop a groundwater banking project near Newman.

The groundwater recharge project has exceeded expectations in pilot studies, said Jarrett Martin, general manager of the Central California Irrigation District and Anthea Hansen, general manager of the Del Puerto Water District. They said plans are in the works to expand the 20-acre pilot project to an 80-acre recharge zone.

Martin said the two agencies have been awarded grants totaling \$6.4

million to expand the recharge project to its full buildout, which is envisioned at 80 acres.

At its heart, the project is straightforward: The participating agencies, in years when water was available, can divert a portion of their surface water allocations from the Delta-Mendota Canal to the recharge project where it percolates into the aquifer for future extraction in years when water supplies are limited.

"I think it is a very basic model," Martin remarked. "When you keep things basic, they tend to work."

The water managers

estimated that the project could provide 10,000 to 15,000 acre-feet of additional water each year which would be split between their agencies (Martin noted that technically the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors are partnering with Del Puerto, but CCID is taking the lead on behalf of the contractors).

The amount of water is significant, particularly in the federal Del Puerto district. Del Puerto, with its junior water rights, is subject to deep cuts in annual surface water allocations and has resorted to aggregating water supplies

from a variety of sources.

This year, for example, Del Puerto is expected to receive only 5 percent of its full contractual allocation, which equates to about two inches of water per acre. Hansen framed the potential benefit of the recharge against that allocation.

"If Del Puerto was short and we could extract 7,500 acre-feet, that is the equivalent of a 5 percent allocation," she explained. "It is only two inches per acre, but it is meaningful when you start adding it with the other projects."

Even though it enjoys senior water rights, CCID

is not immune from reductions to its Central Valley Project allocation. This year, for example, has been declared by the Bureau of Reclamation to be "critical," meaning that the district will receive 75 percent of its full allocation.

Martin said groundwater recharge projects such as that west of Newman are one component of an overall water resources plan which has the target of establishing an additional 50,000 acre-feet of water supply for use in critical years.

Martin explained that the local project, which is

in the area of Orestimba Creek, proved extremely effective in a one-acre pilot project and later the 20-acre project.

"The recharge on it was fantastic," Martin stated. He said the absorption rate was two and a half feet per acre over a 24-hour period - far exceeding the target goal of six inches a day.

While surface water will provide most of the recharge supply, Hansen and Martin said, the project could also be permitted to capture Orestimba Creek flows after heavy

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RECHARGE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

rain events.

A portion of the grant funding received by the agencies, Martin explained, is for a flood control component.

"This in an initial step in what folks have been talking about (regarding flood control on the creek)," he commented. "That doesn't prevent floods from ever occurring, but it is a step to capture flood flows that cause damage downstream and put them to beneficial use."

"That would capture that otherwise would be lost to the system, while prevent-

ing flooding and damaging downstream properties and infrastructure," Hansen said. That would involve diverting creek flow to an underground pipeline carrying the water to the recharge pond, she explained.

Martin said the partnership has an option to purchase the land needed to expand the project to 80 acres.

The terms of the grant funding require completion of the environmental studies no later than February 2022, and then allows two additional years to finish construction of the project.

Hansen and Martin said the project also has potential benefits to grow-

ers in the Eastin Water District, which is between the boundaries of their respective districts and has no surface water rights. Those landowners rely on private wells, they explained.

One premise of the project, they emphasized, is that they will leave behind more water in the aquifer than it introduces.

"We have had some initial discussions with Eastin folks to get them engaged in the project," Martin commented. "We will leave the aquifer better than we found it. There will be a leave-behind. If we put 10,000 acre-feet into the ground, the number we extract will be less than that."



MATTOS NEWSPAPERS FILE PHOTO

Congressman Josh Harder, second from right, visited the CCID/Del Puerto Water District pilot recharge project in 2019.

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