

California Fairs in the 21st Century Working Group

Report to the CDFA Fairs Consortium

October 18, 2011

Purpose

California agricultural fairs, 78 in all, play a central role in agriculture education for millions of guests and serve as the center point for youth agriculture education. For millions of Californians, especially in urban areas, fairs are the only direct experience that connects the public with agriculture production.

To that end, CDFA Secretary Karen Ross appointed the California Fairs in the 21st Century Working Group following the September 20, 2011 CDFA Fairs Consortium meeting and she charged the group with looking at not only what benefits California fairs currently provide to the state, but what is the potential of California fairs in today's world of food and agriculture.

Observations

The working group's initial step was to review the list of benefits created at the first Fairs Consortium meeting by fair managers, board members and advocacy groups. That list is as follows:

- Emergency Services
 - Fairgrounds are regularly used by Cal EMA, Cal Fire and the U.S. Forest Service for fire camps, evacuation centers, and command posts.
 - Fairgrounds are the only facilities that can house people, pets and livestock in a single location.
- Agriculture Literacy
 - Through annual fair events and interim programs, California fairs teach the public about where their food and fiber come from.
- Positive Economic Impact
 - California fairs have a \$2.85 billion economic impact on the state. Of that, \$127 million is in sales tax.
 - Fairs provide for 25,223 fulltime jobs with an \$856 million income impact in wages.
 - The sale of a fairgrounds by the state is a one-time revenue generator while a successfully operating fairgrounds provides constant revenue to the state and local community.
- Education
 - Fairs provide the venue for numerous educational opportunities from public awareness campaigns to youth leadership through 4-H and FFA.
- Community Showcase
 - Fairs are the one place that all the talents and skills of community members are on display in a single location from sewing and canning to fine arts and performing arts.
- Entertainment

- Fairs provide affordable family entertainment including headline musical concerts to local talent shows and everything in between.
- Recreation
 - Fairgrounds provide facilities for numerous recreation opportunities from horseback riding to motor sports to walkathons.
- Tourism
 - Fairs bring people from outside the county and city to communities as a major tourism draw.
- Social Impacts
 - Fairgrounds provide affordable facilities for numerous community activities including weddings, cultural gatherings, along with voting health fairs, veterans services events, and service club fundraisers.
- Security
 - Fairgrounds provide training facilities, flu shot drills, National Stock Pile locations, and many other services that support homeland security for the local community, the county, the region, the state and the country.
- Diversity of Trained Personnel
 - Fairgrounds staff are cross trained in many areas outside of production of the annual fair including emergency response, animal health and husbandry, large gathering accommodation.
- Retention of Needed Open Space
 - Fairgrounds are often the only remaining areas in a community that provide vast amounts of open space for a variety of activities from community celebrations to emergency services.
- Community Nonprofit Fundraising Opportunities
 - Many service clubs and charities raise funds through the fairs by having a food or drink concession, contracting with the fair for services such as trash pick-up and ticket-taking.

Despite all of those great benefits, California fairs relationship with California agriculture is fading. The working group made the following observations as to why this may be:

- The fairs have a broad range of agriculture related programming from the traditional (livestock shows, competitive exhibits) to the innovative (on-site farms, unique public exhibit programs for non-agriculture youth), yet there is no central reporting or promotion of the results and/or impacts to the agriculture community at large.
- Fairs in general have not been actively engaged in local agriculture trends like the explosion of farmers markets, organic farming and buy-local movements.
- Fairs could play a significant role in nutritional education, especially with youth, however, this could conflict with traditional fair time food practices (deep fried everything).
- Agriculture marketing and educational efforts rarely utilize fairs as an outreach tool.
- There is an explosion of farmers markets, cooking classes and festivals in California along with an urban/suburban homesteading movement resulting in new interests like raising backyard chickens, growing “Victory Gardens” and learning more about food.

- This explosion of non-fair food/agriculture events has co-opted the California fairs. These events (such as Gravenstein Fair, Eat Real Festival) are well attended--folks have migrated away from fairs.
- The performing arts world has imploded and is looking for new models. The mission is becoming performances plus education. These organizations now must offer classes, workshops and teaching to support their mission.
- Fairs have opportunities to provide science, engineering and technology with hands-on practicum for students through 4-H and FFA. These are the services that provide the backup for agriculture and food production.
- There is a different future: audiences are looking for less expensive community-driven events. Fairs can hold their own, if they can make decisions they are in the right place.

Taking into consideration the fairs' new reality of 100% self sufficiency as General Fund support was eliminated in the state's 2011/2012 budget, the working group explored ways that fairs can expand current programming or add to their programming that will not only promote agriculture in the locally-grown, healthy-eating, do-it-yourself-communities, but will also translate to more entrepreneurial opportunities.

Recommendation

The California Fairs in the 21st Century Working Group thanks Secretary Ross for allowing them to participate in the innovative and exciting exercise of future casting the California fair industry. The committee discussed ways to improve the relationship between fairs and agriculture to enlarge and improve the ability of fairs to drive an expanded awareness of agriculture related issues and nutrition. To that end, the working group respectfully offers the following recommendations:

1. The explosion of the farmers markets, cooking classes, urban homesteading, and farm-to-table movements reflect the traditional history of fairs going back to their agricultural roots.
 - a. CDFA can provide leadership in training fair staff, serving as an information clearing house and providing collaboration with UC Extension and other entities for fairs to get back in the traditional education role of growing, preparing and preserving food.
2. Youth are the community leaders of tomorrow and fairs can provide even more opportunities for local youth to succeed and exceed through 4-H, FFA, Grange and community volunteer programs.
 - a. If fairs fail, so may the local 4-H, FFA and Grange programs. Fairs need to collaborate with these groups beyond junior livestock programs to provide education in farming technology and science.
 - b. Fairs and youth agriculture programs such as 4-H are the sensible replacement for home economics in schools, teaching the youth of California the basics of cooking, baking, sewing, canning, etc.
 - c. The more involved youth is in the fairs, the more the community will become involved providing higher fair participation, higher fair attendance, and higher volunteerism among youth and adults.
3. CDFA is a clearing house for all things agriculture in California. Here are some ways that fairs can be brought more into the fold to assist in promoting and supporting this great state industry.
 - a. CDFA should collect and report the results of the fair network's existing agriculture impacts such as reporting junior livestock auction sales and fair time attendance figures in CDFA's annual crop report.

- b. The Secretary could share fair dates and locations within the CDFA and across related agencies asking them to consider fairs as a tool for their outreach/educational efforts. For example, fairs were very involved in the "Buckle Up" campaign long ago. Many agencies have outreach goals and budgets to support them.
 - c. CDFA should challenge all of the state agriculture marketing commissions to examine the fair network and recommend creative ways to integrate the fairs into their goals. For example, in Pennsylvania, Hershey sponsors cooking contests at every fair with a statewide final.
4. Fairs can play a major role in nutritional policy state wide to reduce or minimize the conflict between nutrition education and fair time food.
 - a. The Marin County Fair requires vendors to offer a "healthy choice" menu item.
 - b. Some fairs require a \$2 item, allowing patrons to purchase smaller portions of the fun food.
5. The Secretary may consider forming an ongoing working group comprised of fair industry executives and agriculture industry leaders to support stronger local ties between agriculture and fairs with a focus on creative ventures and agriculture trends.
 - a. This group could provide leadership in creating collaboration on such efforts as:
 - i. Community gardens on fairgrounds the public and/or the homeless
 - ii. Veteran-operated farming and/or gardens on fairgrounds.
 - iii. Fairs could provide barn space for junior livestock projects for youth who do not have other facilities available. Could expand to include foster children and/or a partnership with juvenile hall.
6. The CDFA traditional role is budget approval and regulatory review. Offering the fair network non-regulatory input and support for agriculture program development and a structure for recognition of those efforts is a win-win.
 - a. The Secretary should plan to visit fairs with existing outstanding agriculture programs and leverage the CDFA public outreach resources to promote her attendance and the fairs. In addition, the Secretary could announce an Agriculture Excellence Award for fairs that demonstrate innovation and leadership in the field, to be awarded in the Fall of 2012 and based on input from the aforementioned working group.