

May 28, 2008

Comments to be read at the Redding Listening Session.

What is a “must have” in an Ag Vision for California?

My name is Rebecca Desmond and I am the chair of the California Fair Alliance as well as being the CEO of the Siskiyou Golden Fair in Yreka, CA. I am speaking to you today on behalf of the California Fair Industry and how we need an improved partnership with the California Agriculture Industry.

County fairs in California were born from the agriculture industry. Fairs were the place where farmers and ranchers brought their prize crops, livestock and working stock to participate in friendly competitions as well as promote their commodities. California agriculture products were also used for other competitions including pies, cloth, yarn and much more.

Over time a large gap has grown between the agriculture and fair industry, especially in the more urban areas of the state. We need to close that gap, work together and do a much better job of promoting agriculture through county fairs than we have been doing.

A “must have” in the vision of California’s agriculture’s future is a marketing and public relations plan involving California’s fairs.

Fairs have struggled in recent years on ways to best promote agriculture at their events. Agriculture is why fairs exist and it is fast becoming one of the smallest parts of fairs. We need help from the agriculture industry to promote its message. There is no bigger and more affordable place to get your message to so many people in such a short period of time than a county fair.

I would like to quote from the economic impact report conducted for California fairs in 2002:

“When most people think of California, they usually think of large industrialized cities, television and films, or technology and the dot.com industry. What they don’t generally know is that agriculture is one of the state’s major commercial sectors. The economic reality is that the feed lot is as important as the movie lot, and the Central Valley is as vital as Silicon Valley.

“California is home to the largest food and agricultural economy in the nation. California agriculture is also the nation’s leader in the global marketplace, with annual agricultural exports in excess of \$6.5 billion. California truly helps feed the nation and the world.

“Despite the continued central role of agriculture in the state’s economy, many urban and suburban Californians have little contact with the industry except through their local supermarkets. California’s fairs originated as agricultural festivals and have a continuing mission to promote awareness of agriculture.

“The California Department of Food and Agriculture, through its Division of Fairs and Expositions, has a legislative mandate to support and enhance this mission. Whereas grocery stores supply the public with agricultural products, fairs teach the public about agriculture.

“A traditional approach to educating the fair-going public about agriculture is the livestock and other agricultural competitions, exhibitions and auctions. ...High-quality education for California’s young people is a top state priority. A classroom, however, is not the only place where children learn. Raising animals, for instance, is a time-honored way to learn by doing. The junior livestock program offers this opportunity....

“The junior livestock program is a showcase event at many fairs. The program presents a unique chance for school-age youth (ages 9–19), primarily members of 4-H, Future Farmers of America (FFA) and Grange, to competitively exhibit and auction their prize livestock on the open market.

“The livestock auction provides financial recognition to agricultural youth through an educational program, teaching life skills and sportsmanlike competition. As a learning and business venture, the young men and women care for a steer, lamb, hog, chicken, rabbit, goat, or turkey. For these young participants, the junior livestock exhibition and auction is the culmination of considerable time and effort spent in breeding, raising, grooming and preparing their animals. ...

“Young auction participants get both a business education and financial rewards. They learn to provide quality meat products for human consumption and how to be in business for themselves. They learn basic economic concepts such as cost of inputs and profitability. Junior livestock auctions grossed more than \$21 million, with more than 42,000 animals purchased by nearly 19,000 buyers in 2002. Approximately 95 percent of auction proceeds go directly to the students. They typically save this money for college, or reinvest in agriculture by purchasing additional animals.

Thus, the junior livestock program provides young community members with a valuable business lesson and funding for future goals.

“Fairs not only offer young people the chance to be part of agriculture and the competitive exhibits program, they offer this opportunity to people of all ages. Fairs have numerous agricultural and artistically related competitions that are open to the general public. These exhibit programs focus on

rewarding excellence. Encouraged by ribbons and prize money (premiums) offered by the fairs, entrants make significant efforts to showcase California agriculture and artistic excellence through various exhibit categories. Millions of fairgoers are entertained and educated in the process.

“During the 2002 season, California’s fairs judged more than 613,000 exhibits, resulting in a total of \$4.2 million paid in fair premiums. This total included nearly 102,000 FFA and 4-H exhibits, more than 21,000 horticultural exhibits, and more than 79,000 floricultural exhibits. Along with the junior livestock program, this variety of exhibits demonstrates the success of fairs in agricultural education.”

All of these numbers sound fantastic, but the reality is these numbers are down from traditional agriculture involvement at fairs. For example, alfalfa is the second highest crop grown in Siskiyou County. At fair time, we are lucky to have two or three bales to be judged. More than 30,000 acres of grain was planted in 2006. At the fair there are 17 different classes of grain to enter. In 2007 we only had one entry. The local Farm Bureau has come on board in just the last three years to partner with us on ag education projects. We need more participation, partnerships and support from the agriculture industry to promote California Agriculture.

We need financial support and sponsorships to be able to provide higher premiums, more competitions, and better advertising at the fair to promote this great industry. Farmers and ranchers need incentives to take an entire week away from their operations to participate in the fair, let alone do a lot of promotions while at the fair.

Patrons walk through the barns and buildings and see livestock and agriculture entries, but they don’t know anything about them or their

importance to their everyday lives. Fairs are trying to do the promoting, but there is not enough money to cover the staff time and materials necessary to do an adequate job.

The USDA is having difficulty getting farmers to respond to the Agriculture Census, mostly due to a lack of information about just why the data is being collected and how it will be used. A booth at county fairs could provide some one-on-one discussions and opportunity to answer questions from the farming community that could result in a better response to the census. This is just one example of the valuable community outreach that fairs provide.

The youth in California is our future, the future of agriculture and the future of fairs. Without being able to educate and inspire the youth to follow a path to agriculture, it will suffer dearly as will fairs.

California fairs do not receive any state tax money. We do receive some state support from pari-mutuel horse racing licensing fees. This support is usually only 10-20% of the entire fair's operating revenues, the rest are obtained by the fair itself through fair admissions, sponsorships, fair operated interim events and facility rentals.

Fairs are facing the same hardships as other businesses in the state with increased operational costs. This means cutting back in programming, raising entry fees, eliminating exhibit classes, etc. just to keep the fairgrounds alive for the annual fair each year. The bottom line is that we need your help.

California agriculture needs fairs and California fairs need agriculture. So when you are planning for the future of California Agriculture, please remember that we are here, standing by and ready to share your vision.

Respectfully submitted,

Rebecca Desmond

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