

MEETING OF THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE  
SMALL-SCALE PRODUCER ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
(ALL MEETINGS OPEN TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC)

**Location:** Virtual via Zoom

**Contact:** Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity  
Advisor

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**MEETING MINUTES OF DECEMBER 2, 2025**

Item  
No.

**(1) WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

Thea Rittenhouse welcomed the committee members and provided a brief introduction of Cdfa staff. She also went over committee rules and welcomed the Committee Chair, Justin Miller, to facilitate the discussions.

**(2) ROLL CALL**

**Present**

Justin Miller

Luis Elizondo

Beverly McKinney

Patrick Mitchell

Josefina Lara Chavez

Anna Nakamura Knight

Lovepreet Kaur

Veronica Mazariegos Anastassiou

Wendy Kornberg

Kerry McGrath

**Absent**

None

**(3) CALL TO ORDER**

SSPAC Committee Chair Justin Miller called the meeting to order at 1:09 p.m.

**(4) Cdfa DEPARTMENTAL UPDATES**

- Legislative Office- Carney King, Cdfa Legislative Manager

Carney King provided legislative updates, noting that it was a particularly busy year in the Governor's office due to the high volume of bills awaiting action. He reported that a total of 2,397 bills were introduced across both legislative houses. Of these, 917 bills were sent to the Governor's desk, and he signed 794 into law, while approximately 13% were vetoed.

Carney stated that the key issues for the legislature included housing and energy affordability, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Prop 50, congressional maps. Some of the bills highlighted were:

- AB258 by Assemblymember Damon Conolly will help generate more revenue for fairgrounds.
- AB 732 by Assemblymember Alexandra Macedo will help County Ag Commissioners enforce penalties for neglected crops.
- AB 1264 is the first bill in the nation to define ultra processed foods and prohibits them from schools.
- AB 1156 by Assemblymember Wicks is pending as a two-year bill and it will help convert Williamson Act easements into solar use easements.
- SB 72 by Senator Caballero updates the state water plan with new long-term supply targets.
- SB 89 was held in committee, and it would have prohibited the sale of pesticides containing glyphosate in California, unless one is licensed by the Department of Pesticide Regulations (DPR).
- SB 279 expands the exemptions for composting operations on farms, allowing up to 5,000 cubic yards of compostable materials to be resold or to be given away without further licensing requirements.
- SB 493 would change the compensation and title for all the DAA Fairground managers, and it is currently a two-year bill.

Carney informed Committee members that there is new leadership in the Senate; Senator Monique Limón from Santa Barbara is now the Senate pro tempore until 2028 and is the first Latina to lead either house. Senator Limone previously chaired the committee on Natural Resources and Water. This appointment can represent changes in committee assignments in the Senate, and it might affect previous Senate priorities.

There were no comments from Committee members.

- CDFA Budget Update- Arima Kozina, Deputy Secretary of Administration & Finance

Arima informed Committee members that the State will have a budget finalized on January 10, 2026, when she will be able to provide an update and presentation to this group.

On Proposition 4 programs, Arima said that CDFA was not given an Administrative Procedure Act (ADA) exemption, which means that CDFA will have to develop a regulatory framework and create emergency regulations for any Prop 4 programs.

Arima stated that the Healthy Soils and State Water Efficiency and Enhancement (SWEEP) Programs in CDFA's Office of Agricultural Resilience and Sustainability (OARS) will continue to have a blanket ADA exemption, as in past solicitations. These programs will be administered as block grants to organizations that provide integrated technical assistance and on-farm practice payments to producers. Once the money is appropriated and there are some guidelines established, CDFA's OARS will be responsible for program development and administration. A draft request for grant applications (RGA) for both

HSP and SWEEP is expected in early 2026. The process will be like past block grant model programs, where a draft RGA is released followed by a public comment period and final RGA. The public comment period will be announced to this committee so members can provide feedback. Organizations will be able to apply for block grants, and they will be able to provide direct producer grants to eligible applicants.

Arima said that other programs that will have to go through an emergency regulations process through the Office of Administrative Law (OAL) are two farmers markets programs, the invasive species council, Tribal food sovereignty, and equipment sharing program. She informed members of the committee that this process will likely delay the release of RGA's, but that there will be an opportunity for public engagement during that emergency regulatory process.

Public Comments- None

**(5) ACTION ITEM- Approval of September 18, 2025, Meeting Minutes**

Committee members present unanimously approved the September 2025 Meeting Minutes.

**(6) DISCUSSION ITEMS**

- BIPOC Producer Advisory Committee Update- BIPOC Committee Chair could not attend this meeting to provide updates on this agenda item.
- Strategic Growth Council's (SGC) Agricultural Land Equity Taskforce (ALEFT) Update- Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity Advisor

Thea Rittenhouse said that the ALEFT met recently to discuss final recommendations for the Governor and Legislature to address land equity and access to affordable farmland for underserved producers and Tribal land stewards in California. The group will host one more hybrid (virtual/in person) meeting on December 11, 2025, to finalize and approve their report, which is expected to be submitted to the Governor and Legislature by January 1, 2026, by the SGC. The ALEFT is currently working through detailed definitions included in the report, such as small-scale agriculture, and they hope for consensus at their meeting next week. The final report will be discussed during the SGC's general meeting in February from 1:00pm – 4:00 pm, and a celebratory event for task force members will be held in the morning. Thea encouraged committee members to attend the December 11<sup>th</sup> meeting virtually or submit public comments online by January 1.

Public comments- None

**(7) DEFINING SMALL-SCALE FARMS PANEL PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION**

**California Small-Scale Dairy and Livestock Operations**

- Lynn McBride, Executive Director California Dairy Campaign  
Small scale Dairy Farmers throughout CA

Lynne McBride, a member of the California Farmers' Union, shared insights into the evolving dairy landscape in California and the broader United States. She highlighted the dramatic shift from the past, when California had over 2,000 dairies with an average herd size of 600 cows, to the present, where the number of dairy farms has decreased to around 1,000 but the average herd size has grown to 2,000 cows.

Lynne also discussed her visit to Canada, where she learned about their more stable and profitable dairy system. Unlike the U.S., Canadian dairy farmers received a 2.3% raise last year due to strategic production management aligned with market demand. In contrast, U.S. dairy farmers, especially in California, are producing more milk but are paid below production costs, leading to financial strain and a steady decline in the number of dairy farms in reference to the article published by The Bullvine.

She emphasized the volatility of the dairy industry, noting that small-scale farms are particularly vulnerable. In Wisconsin, for example, dairy farm closures have been occurring at a rate of 5% annually. Lynne attributed part of the pricing issue to a policy by the Department of Agriculture that increased the amount dairy farmers must pay the processors who produce cheese, while milk producers receive less compensation. This has created a highly consolidated market with few buyers, leaving farmers with limited options and reduced bargaining power.

The oversupply of milk further exacerbates the problem, as the market cannot absorb the excess, driving prices down and increasing financial pressure on producers.

Committee members Kerry McGrath and Ann Knight sought clarification on whether herds of 600 or even 2,000 cows could be considered small-scale. Lynne responded by explaining that definitions vary by state and context, but her organization focuses on whether a farm can cover its operational costs. She noted that farms with fewer than 2,000 cows often struggle financially, especially given current milk prices. Ann also asked whether financial viability or pricing is the main driver in the dairy industry, to which Lynne responded that her team has been observing closures rather than tracking current herd numbers.

The conversation also touched on regional differences and market structures. Committee member Kerry McGrath mentioned that in Sonoma County, the average herd size is around 300 cows, prompting further discussion on what constitutes small-scale farming. Committee member Veronica Mazariegos asked about processor consolidation and its impact on farming, particularly in dairy. Lynne listed several major processors in California, including California Dairies Inc., CDI, DFA, and Land O'Lakes, and explained how deductions from farmers' paychecks, especially during price drops make operations difficult.

Committee Chair Justin Miller thanked Lynne for the insights, noting the committee's interest in capturing data on farms that operate outside traditional processing channels.

- Grace Woodmansee, UC Cooperative Extension Livestock Advisor, Siskiyou County

Grace emphasized her role as a vital link between small-scale farmers and ranchers and the broader resources available for them. Her work involves translating academic research into practical applications, tailored to the unique needs of local producers. She highlighted that her presentation was grounded in her firsthand experiences working with these communities, focusing on how extension advisors help bridge the gap between research institutions and agricultural practitioners in Siskiyou County.

She shared that small-scale producers often reach out for guidance on establishing sustainable operations. Grace clarified that she wouldn't present specific data on numbers that constitutes small scale farms due to its complexity but stressed the importance of understanding that "small-scale" is not a fixed definition but can be a destination or a phase in a producer's journey. She urged the committee to recognize that each operation is shaped by individual goals, philosophies, and business models, making it essential to avoid one-size-fits-all assumptions when discussing small-scale agriculture.

Grace provided insights into herd sizes and grazing land diversity in California, noting that the average herd size of dairies in the state is larger than the national average. She explained that California's rangelands vary widely in productivity and management practices, with some relying solely on rainfall and others using irrigated pastures, which are more productive but subject to regulatory and water availability challenges. These factors, she noted, are closely tied to producers' goals, whether for production, ecological services, or targeted grazing.

Finally, Grace addressed the shared challenges between small- and large-scale producers. She highlighted the vulnerability of small-scale ranchers, especially those in growth phases or operating as a lifestyle choice rather than a business. Some of the challenges pointed out include lack of buffers such as capital, land access, climate change, and social networks that help navigate challenges like drought, market uncertainties, and regulatory pressures.

Committee Chair Justin Miller asked whether small scale rancher running an operation as hobby using other sources of income such as retirement or money from another job, would be considered a serious operation. Grace stated that a business must be able to support itself. If the operation is going into debt year after year, losing money but keeping animals on the property, then that would not be a ranching operation but rather a hobby operation.

Grace concluded by emphasizing the need for targeted technical assistance and the importance of understanding where operations are most vulnerable to build resilience. It is important to think about where vulnerable people are in the equation. Depending on the circumstances of each individual operation, there are areas to flex such as buying hay during drought season, extra land to expand grazing fields.

Grace reiterated the importance of knowing where people are vulnerable such as lack of technical support, access to information, management capacity, and drought adaptation strategies. She emphasized that understanding where producers lose their buffer, whether in marketing, business management, or resource access, is crucial for

tailoring support effectively. She also noted that established farms tend to be more resilient than first-generation ranchers, highlighting the importance of experience and existing infrastructure. Ultimately, she stressed the need to assess each operation individually, considering its unique goals and characteristics to support sustainable growth and long-term viability.

Justin Miller acknowledged the complexity and importance of defining the small-scale producers for this committee.

Committee member Kerry McGrath raised concerns about the challenges faced by ranchers who do not have their own ranch or sufficient financial resources, such as the difficulty in valuing the ecosystem service of grazing and cutting down the grass. Grace responded by noting that the feasibility of such services varies by location, citing Siskiyou County as an example where there's little push for targeted grazing despite the availability of courses for ranchers.

Panelist Jose Alcaez brought up the issue of mental health of new farmers, prompting Grace to highlight the importance of social and technical networks, as well as peer-to-peer learning in supporting newcomers. Member Beverly McKinney asked whether there's an estimate for a good average of cattle per acre, to which Grace replied that it's difficult to generalize due to variables like production phase, nutrient demand, and land type.

Veronica pointed out that small scale ranchers often face strict regulatory challenges, and Grace added that in Siskiyou County, many ranchers are first-generation and have managed to avoid burn-out by simplifying their operations. Member Anna Nakamura Knight inquired about distinguishing between hobby and business operations, and Grace explained that tracking business expenses is one way to assess this, though some ranchers engage in activities like meat cutting for personal interest rather than profit. She also mentioned that her county defines small-scale ranching as having fewer than 15 pregnant cattle, though this definition has faced pushbacks from those with larger herds like 40 in number. Member Wendy Kornberg commented that many ranchers in her area struggle with profitability, especially in beef production, and often rely on timber income during tough years, noting a decline in stocking rates due to environmental changes.

Public Comment- Devii Rao, livestock and natural resources Advisor with UC Cooperative Extension in Sonoma and Marin Counties announced that she will be carrying out a formal needs assessment through interviews with ranchers in those counties. They will start the interviews in January 2026, and the goal is to have a paper published later. Davey is also collaborating with advisors in the Central Sierra, Central Coast and southern San Joaquin Valley.

### **California Urban Agriculture Overview and Perspectives**

- o Elle Mari, Urban Food Equity Director, Center for Community Health, University of California San Diego

Elle provided an overview of how they work with underserved local small-scale growers through their Growing Equity program, which was funded by CDFA through the Urban

Agriculture Grant Program. Through this funding, they were able to award a total of \$270,000 to local urban agriculture projects.

With a background in food systems, Elle approaches urban agriculture with a social justice lens. Elle acknowledged the great work that UCCE has been leading in local communities but mentioned how their focus has been on community gardens, leaving a gap in resources and technical assistance for first generation farmers who want to make an impact in the communities where they live.

As a Food Equity Director, Elle started a collaborative network of urban farmers in San Diego County, by helping farmers gain access to public benefits dollars so that their customers can get their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) boxes using their SNAP EBT cards and accept vouchers from customers in the WIC program. This approach is centered in community Health by focusing on public health and education. Elle further stated that they are building healthy equity by utilizing empty lots in urban spaces to grow food and mitigate negative environmental effects. The program is to build community food sovereignty, health, and climate resilience through urban agriculture.

Some small farmers have been farming in very vulnerable areas that they have experienced flooding multiple times. Projects funded through Growing Equity are located within the California Climate Priority Population areas to amplify urban farmers as agents of change, land stewards, and community leaders. Some of the funds went towards infrastructure, technical assistance, and workforce development.

- Cathryn Henning, Owner/Operator of BeeWorthy Farms

Cathryn Henning previously worked for local schools and now operates one of three small flower farms in her area. Although she is passionate about farming and dreams of expanding her operation, the high costs of water, labor, and other essential resources make it financially challenging. As a small-scale flower producer, she faces additional obstacles such as limited land availability, difficult terrain like hilly landscapes, and the high cost of living in regions where farming could otherwise thrive. Despite these challenges, there is strong demand for her flowers. However, the influx of new growers has introduced competition and raised concerns about maintaining quality standards. Training employees is another hurdle, especially for those managing operations alone. She believes that joining cooperatives could provide much-needed support and resources for small farmers like herself.

- Jose Alcaez, Owner/Operator of La Chispa Farm

Jose shared his experiences as a micro farmer. Jose Alcaez has been farming for the past six to seven years. He began his journey without any background in agriculture, starting out at La Chispa Farm. As a first-generation farmer, the transition was challenging because his first year was part-time, and he faced significant obstacles including flooding, limited land access, and housing instability. He also encountered a disconnect with institutions offering loans, technical support, and market access, which made navigating the business side of farming time-consuming and difficult. Despite these hurdles, joining a program like the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) was a turning point as they offered fair prices regardless of farm size and helped him launch his business.

Jose also benefited from free compost, an apprenticeship program, and access to a local food market, though sales through the market weren't guaranteed. Relying on others and being part of a larger support network in San Diego has made a meaningful difference, even opening doors to consulting opportunities. Weekly farm updates with a fellow farmer have become a vital source of emotional support, helping him stay motivated through the ups and downs of farming.

Anna Knight, Committee Member asked Jose if he had encountered any specific definitions of "small-scale" farming when he was referred to as a micro farmer. Jose shared that being categorized as a micro farmer significantly limited the types of loans he could apply for, particularly with programs like FarmLink. He emphasized that the way his farm operates doesn't always align with rigid definitions, which can restrict access to resources.

Cathryn Henning added that the distinction between "micro" and "small" farms often depends on the nature of the operations rather than a fixed standard. Elle Mari also pointed out that funding opportunities do exist, but the current definitions of small-scale farming can be too narrow, potentially limiting a farmer on the kind of loans they apply. It also limits the vision and ability to grow their operations in ways that align with their goals.

Justin Miller thanked presenters for their time and presentations.

Public Comment- None

**(8) TOPICS FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS**

Thea suggested to the committee to get a perspective of large-scale producers. Committee member Anna Knight requested a presentation on agritourism on small-scale farms.

**(9) NEXT QUARTERLY MEETING**

Thea Rittenhouse will send an email to define the meeting schedule for 2026. She will also do a follow-up to make sure if anyone has thoughts for the small-scale definition. The next meeting will be held in March 2026.

**(10) PUBLIC COMMENTS**

There were no public comments.

**(11) CLOSING COMMENTS AND ADJOURNMENT**

Committee Chair Justin Miller thanked everyone for their valuable thoughts and knowledge brought to the committee.

Thea Rittenhouse let the members know that the presentations will be shared with the full Committee. Having no other additional comments or announcements, Committee Chair Justin Miller closed the meeting at 3:55 pm.