

The state never saw these SGMA impacts coming

A study released this week presents disturbing findings about the broad impacts the implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) will likely bring to the San Joaquin Valley over the coming decades.

In the world's most productive farmland, spanning Fresno, Tulare and Kern Counties, up to a fifth of the overall acres will be fallowed. **Hit hardest in the aftermath will be some of California's lowest income working families, where 75% of the households are already under the poverty line. The indirect losses – up to \$2 billion in wages and 85,000 jobs each year – will be permanent.**



Yet the state has never performed an economic impact analysis on SGMA. In their research, the authors of the paper even used CalEPA's own environmental justice screening tool to pinpoint the census tracts with the biggest job losses.

“I feel like we're filling an important gap,” UC Berkeley Professor and lead author David Sunding told *Agri-Pulse*. “Nobody did this before the legislation got passed.”

In 2014, legislative appropriations committees did estimate that the three SGMA bills would cost the state up to \$4 million per year for the Department of Water Resources to review sustainability plans and provide technical support.

In comments opposing the bills at the time, the California Farm Bureau Federation worried about the “huge long-term economic impacts on farms, the state and local economies and county tax rolls” and SGMA's “very real potential to devalue land and impact farms and businesses viability, and in turn impact jobs.”

Last month, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office found the state has so far provided roughly \$160 million in total from General Fund dollars for SGMA-related responsibilities, with another \$270 million from general obligation bonds to support local efforts. In a January budget hearing, the Department of Finance acknowledged it has not been tracking the potential economic impacts of SGMA and has not factored those into the state’s proposed budget for next year.

“That it’s not even on their radar is definitely concerning,” said Republican Assemblymember Devon Mathis of Tulare County in an interview, “especially since the numbers from the Berkeley report show a higher amount than what the Department of Finance is putting into the state’s rainy-day fund.”

He pointed to the proposed \$6 billion for the rainy-day fund and to the report’s estimated \$7 billion in lost farm revenue each year. The state will also lose close to \$300 million in tax revenues annually from SGMA, while the valley’s city and county governments stand to lose \$240 million annually, according to the report.

Sunding does not believe, however, that SGMA will throw the state into a recession, as Mathis feared.

“I wouldn’t expect it to be put into a budget projection for next year, or even the next five years,” he said, referring to SGMA’s 20-year timeline for basins to reach sustainability.

Nevertheless, the paper “is definitely getting people’s attention,” he said.

In January, Sunding and the coalition of water users, local governments and academics that commissioned the study, known as the Water Blueprint for the San Joaquin Valley, delivered preliminary results from the study to Gov. Gavin Newsom, his cabinet and a handful of legislative and congressional lawmakers.

“My sense was they were definitely paying attention,” said Sunding. “They had not heard a lot of this information before.”

The following week, Newsom announced at a luncheon for the Public Policy Institute of California that he “cares deeply about the folks in the valley.”

“It’s not just Big Ag,” he added. “There are real human beings whose lives are being torn asunder because of the scarcity of water.”

The report has also gained attention in Congress. After the Newsom meeting, Friant Water Authority CEO Jason Phillips recited the same findings in a House committee hearing on funding water infrastructure projects.



Friant Water Authority CEO Jason Phillips discusses SGMA study in House hearing.

The findings were surprising to Sunding as well.

“To me, this raises really significant land use issues,” he said. “If you’ve got a million acres that can no longer support farming, what are you going to do with that?”

Fallowing as much as one in four acres in some areas could lead to the same stubborn air quality issues now taking place in the Imperial Valley as the Sultan Sea continues to recede, he explained.

The report also comes on the heels of another impactful study, released by PPIC a year earlier. Sunding’s report adds to that work while diverging on a few key aspects.

It goes beyond SGMA to also anticipate reductions in surface water deliveries from the state choosing to maintain the original biological opinions governing Delta pumping operations. In this scenario, the administration also fails to sign voluntary agreements with water contractors over those flows. The report adds in water cutbacks as well from implementing the San Joaquin River restoration agreement and from climate change impacts like sea level rise.



Asm. Devon Mathis, R-Visalia

Rather than going back 30 years, Sunding also looks at groundwater estimates for the last 15 years, when extraction was significantly higher.

The third distinction is the report only includes the water transfers already happening, rather than exploring various trading scenarios as PPIC did. Sunding plans a follow-up analysis in the coming months to explore that area. But he is already not optimistic about open trading.

“Having worked a lot on groundwater markets, I find that very unlikely to happen,” he said, adding that local governments are already restricting transfers. **“Think about it: In a dry year, if you're a county supervisor in Madera County, do you want to see hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of groundwater pumped out of your county and sent down to Bakersfield?”**

In response to questions about Sunding’s report, the governor’s office offered a prepared statement from Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot:

“It’s clear that water supply reliability is important to economic vitality in the Central Valley,” writes Crowfoot. **“That’s why the Newsom administration is increasing support to local communities implementing SGMA, proposing new regionally-focused bond investments to diversify water supplies and driving voluntary agreements that improve environmental conditions more quickly and holistically than regulatory requirements, while maintaining water supply certainty to communities, farms and businesses.”**

Farmers fear Ag Order 4.0 will slash lettuce and berry production

A costly new regulation has farm groups worried the year-round lettuce and berry production on the Central Coast will be reduced to just one season, with spiraling impacts on the local economy, such as widespread job losses for farmworkers.

“It's going to dramatically change the pattern of how we grow our crops here,” said Norm Groot, director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau. “There's right now no science to indicate how we would even begin to comply.”

The ambitious regulation is known as Ag Order 4.0, and the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board recently posted its draft proposal for public comment. It would expand new monitoring and reporting requirements while also setting a low cap on the amount of nitrogen growers can apply.

A regional coalition of farm groups is now scrambling under a 45-day window to review the science related to the technical policies proposed, commission an economist to perform an impact study, develop an alternative proposal and rally growers to participate in the process.



Adding further pressure to the timeline, Groot and others who have worked closely with the board for years on the regulatory orders were kept in the dark about critical details in the plan until the full draft was shared.

At the heart of the proposal is a new way of accounting for the amount of nitrogen that is likely discharged into watersheds.

The State Water Resources Control Board passed a regulation in 2018 known as the East San Joaquin Order. It established a statewide precedent for calculating the ratio of nitrogen applied versus the amount remaining in the soil. The intention with the State Water Board was to collect and analyze this data to help determine appropriate next steps, according to Abby Taylor-Silva, the vice president of policy at the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California.

The regional board is now “taking it to the next level” by adopting that calculation to set a firm limit on the amount of fertilizer potentially remaining in the soil after the crop is harvested, according to Groot. The board wants that cap to be 50 pounds of nitrogen per acre per year.

“That's a very low number, considering the crops that we grow here in the Central Coast,” said Groot, as he listed out a variety of healthy foods like leafy greens, strawberries and other fruits and vegetables that are shipped nationwide.

Groot said no tools currently exist to show how growers would comply with that limit. He is also skeptical the nitrates left in the soil are actually contributing to groundwater degradation, since

farmers are using “a heck of a lot less fertilizer” than even a decade ago and irrigation practices have improved, allowing less water to seep into the ground or run off the field.

Taylor-Silva did see indications in the new draft regulation that the board might open the door for opportunities to credit farmers in that calculation for their existing practices that benefit water quality. The plan does include this type of credit for composting.

Just as concerning to Groot is that Ag Order 4.0 also requires vegetative buffers along ditches, creeks and other waterways. He said the science is not in on whether that improves water supply. But it comes at a steep cost to the grower, who will have to trim back acreage to accommodate the buffers, which could ultimately affect land and rental values.

Last year, ag groups delivered a presentation to the board explaining how the buffers would also conflict with food safety standards. The Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement – as well as today’s retail buyers – have set strict standards for safe distances between vegetative areas and production fields. Yet the board did not change its course in the draft plan.

One positive addition Taylor-Silva noticed in the draft, however, was language encouraging third-party groups. **The coalition is currently assembling an alternative plan to present to the board and the centerpiece is third-party coalitions, which would help to manage compliance issues and handle some of the reporting, particularly for small growers.**

Groot described a “daunting” list of requirements for monitoring, reporting and data management that growers must already meet.

“(Small growers) simply don’t have the manpower or the resources to do this on their own,” he said of the plan. “I don’t think they’re going to be able to absorb this, nor will they be able to comply with all the requirements.”



Abby Taylor-Silva, the vice president of policy at the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California (left)

Demand would grow for the limited amount of outside experts who do this work, which would significantly drive up their rates. Large growers would also struggle, as the board would require more monitoring, reporting, sampling and testing for those farms.

Groot and others involved in the regulatory process are also racing to complete an economic analysis that factors in the potential impacts. They will commission an economist but will have to first educate the individual on the agricultural issues, with just a matter of days left over to put together the preliminary findings. The full analysis would be brought into the review process at a later time.

That report would hopefully answer some of the many questions around what the regulation could mean to the local economy, such as an amount of job losses or reduced tax revenues from

a downsized ag industry. Taylor-Silva pointed out that irrigated agriculture accounts for about 20% of Monterey County's economic viability.

The coalition is also working with agronomists to explore other unintended consequences. If the regulation makes it infeasible to use some fertilizers, they want to know how that would affect the quality of the crop and if other materials would be available and effective.

“We're scrambling our best to get some expert opinions into the conversation so that they can basically educate the staff and the board members on what agronomically is possible when you're growing the types of crops that we grow here,” said Groot.

He also stressed that the regional board must first understand it will take “many, many years” to accomplish the water quality goals, due simply to the nature of groundwater aquifers.

The board has to adopt its regulation by January 2021, when Ag Order 3.0 expires. But it could approve a new regulation as early as Fall. Farm groups are calling it an artificially short timeline, a complaint stemming from the first iterations of the order.

Initially, the regulation served as an information gathering tool. In 2012, the board expanded the scope to add more reporting requirements for large growers. The State Water Board was contesting parts of that order in a lawsuit as the Central Coast Board was approving Ag Order 3.0 in 2017.

With the East San Joaquin Order coming online, the regional board renewed their order on just a three-year schedule, rather than the standard five, knowing it would soon have to incorporate the new state regulation into the plan. The board assumed that would be a quick process and little would change in the regulation.

Ag groups then teamed up with fishing and environmental groups in a separate lawsuit over that process. The settlement agreement bumped back the expiration date for Ag Order 3.0 by a year. That deadline is now rapidly approaching.

The board has scheduled four days in May to discuss the proposal, along with the public comments and any alternative plans submitted. It is also hosting three workshops later in March to go over the order and answer questions.

Groot and Taylor-Silva are doing all they can to reach a compromise in the coming months and avoid further appeals to the State Water Board and further lawsuits.

“I'm hoping that now that there is a document in place,” said Taylor-Silva, “there are opportunities to get more specific and illustrate the challenges a bit more than when (the order) was more theoretical.”

California wine industry starts path to supply and demand corrections

California winegrape growers and vintners are trudging through a painful economic passage that farmers worldwide have tread time and again: an unforgiving market.

When production nudges supply only moderately above market demands, it can punish producers harshly.

The sin of growers was to keep doing what had worked so well, explained Jeff Bitter, president of Allied Grape Growers, which monitors California grape acreage, production and wine stocks.

“Our growth had been so consistent over two decades,” he said, describing a generally steady 3% annual growth in sales during that time. “People just became accustomed to that growth, and that’s what they planned for the future.”

Growers were planting up to about 30,000 acres of new vineyards a year and not removing enough tracts of old vines, until the bearing acreage swelled to about 590,000 in 2018 and 2019. On top of that, the highly productive Central Coast had a bumper crop in 2018, and Californians grew and crushed nearly 4.3 million tons of winegrapes.



California grape vineyard, courtesy USDA.

Worse, the long growth in total wine sales stalled out, Bitter said, while wineries continued to make more wine than they could sell in recent years, adding to surplus stocks.

The 2018 crop “pushed us over the edge,” he said.

In 2019, many wineries slammed their brakes on open-market purchasing from growers and let some contracts with growers expire, leading to a plunge in winegrape prices.

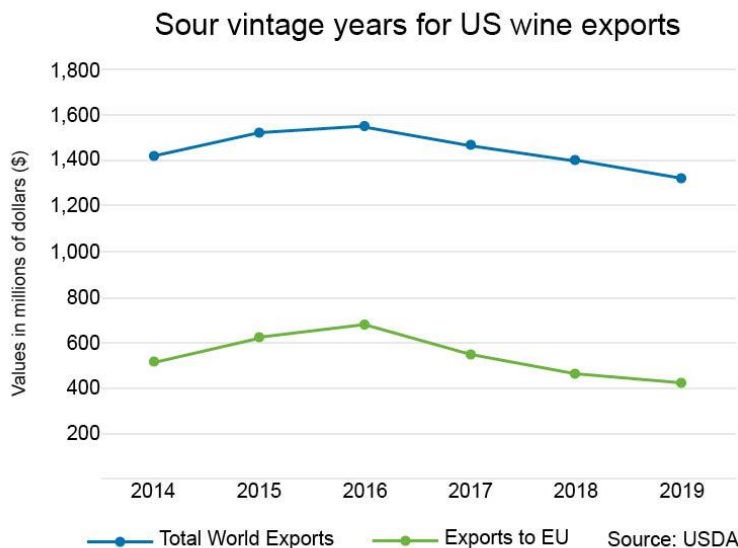
Thousands of vineyard acres were left unharvested last fall, and lots of harvested grapes had no buyers. The 2019 California Grape Crush Report, released this month by USDA and the California Department of Food and Agriculture, reflects the industry’s skid: a 9% plunge in tons of grapes crushed (due in part to weather), despite little change from 2018’s record bearing acreage.

“In the wine business, you have to plan so far ahead to accommodate future demand that by the time you plant a vineyard and get it producing (an interval of five or more years), and then make wine and age it and barrel it and all that stuff, you’re talking about (many) years ... to get it on the store shelf,” said Bitter, adding: “Wine is not a commodity that clears itself in the market. It hangs around and becomes inventory, (for years whenever you exceed demand),” he said.

Foreign trade challenges are contributing to growers’ pain.

California, which accounts for 95% of U.S. wine exports, sells about 20% of production abroad most years. U.S. wine exports rose 90% from 2006 to 2016, topping \$1.5 billion, USDA records show. But exports have since dropped by more than \$200 million, owing essentially to an even bigger plunge of \$260 million a year in sales to the European Union.

The U.S. wine exports picture is complex and some wineries are doing very well. The quality and reputation of California wine has soared so much, for example, it was reported at the recent 2020 California Wine Global Export Conference that average international prices of California’s bottled wine are now second highest globally, between prices of French (number one) and Italian bottles.



Yet sales abroad have dropped overall.



John Aguirre

“Certainly, the strong dollar is a substantial hindrance for U.S. wine (sales),” said John Aguirre, president of the Association of Winegrape Growers (AGG), explaining how it adds to California wine prices abroad.

The U.S. trade war has been choking wine sales in China, an emerging market recently for California vintners. China has retaliated against President Donald Trump’s tariff actions by bumping up its tariffs on American wine to 93% since early 2018. U.S. wine sales to China fell from \$79 million in 2016 to \$39 million in 2019.

Aguirre said China wasn’t the largest market, but was large and growing rapidly for California wine exports.

“So it’s very disappointing to see our exports diminishing, because we were on track to make major headway in that market,” he said. “It’s a tremendous lost opportunity with respect to China.”

If export troubles aren’t enough, wine imports are also squeezing California producers. They’re up about 16% by both volume and value in the past five years, and over a third of wine Americans consume is now imported, industry researchers find.

“The U.S. is the largest consumer market for wine and the most profitable, and that attracts a lot of attention from wine-producing competitors,” said Aguirre.

Much of the imports are low-priced bulk wine purchased by large wine companies for bottling and otherwise marketing in the U.S. He said growers in the Central Valley, who compete at the more economical end of the spectrum, have been among the first to lose sales to such imports.

“It’s very challenging to compete with Europe, Australia, Chile and Argentina in the lower-priced spectrum,” he said.

Still, the California industry is not facing disaster, despite the tough year for many producers. The 2019 average price for winegrapes, at \$805 a ton, for example, is about 4% higher than the previous five-year average.

“There are two issues,” said Bitter. “We’ve got to adjust our bearing acres for the future... But we’ve also got to work through the inventory we have now, which is at all-time-high levels. That takes a little time.”

Bitter said 30,000 to 50,000 acres need to be cut. His group's monitoring of acreage decisions by growers so far suggests a net reduction of 20,000 acres is likely, and perhaps more.

“So, I don’t think we’re going to accomplish what we need to accomplish in this single year... and I think it may be a two-year effort to get our bearing acreage where it needs to be,” he said. “We’re not that far off: maybe just a 5 or 7% adjustment in acres and we’ll be back into balance.”

Long term, the needed correction is on the demand side, said Rob McMillan, vice president in charge of wine sector lending at Silicon Valley Bank.

McMillan, in a recent industry assessment, agreed growers must pull out vines to slash production in the short term. But he said vintners and grape growers are both “missing the mark on consumer expectations” and not competing well in the beverage market.

“(Slumping demand) hurts everybody, whether you’re a grower, a winery, a cork manufacturer, bottle supplier ... (or making) labels, bags,” he said.



Rob McMillan

McMillan wanted all players in the industry “to come together and find some of the solutions,” particularly in branding wine as healthy and for new consumers.

“(Grape growers and wineries) are on the side of the angels – you can’t get a more natural product than wine,” he said.

McMillan noted that the recent large sales of 2018 vintage Napa Valley Cabernet in the bulk market hinted at relief in that corner of the wine market.

“But if that leads anyone to think the pain is over – it’s not,” he said.

Amid Coronavirus, US ag counting on signs of Chinese recovery

China is still battling to contain coronavirus infections, but the U.S. ag sector is taking heart in signs that industry there is coming back to life in time for trade to resume under the “phase one” deal announced in December.

More Chinese truckers are taking to the road as stevedores return to the ports and workers go back to their jobs at feed mills, but the virus is still feeding uncertainty, curbing marketing efforts and threatening wider disruption beyond China.

“Manufacturing plants are starting back up and transportation bottlenecks are clearing up,” says one U.S. government official monitoring the situation in China.

That’s good news for U.S. farmers and ranchers who are hoping to take advantage of China’s recent decision to exempt some importers from tariffs on U.S. farm commodities. **Monday was the first day that Chinese importers of a wide variety of farm goods could begin applying to avoid the country’s steep retaliatory tariffs on products such as soybeans, pork, corn, wheat, whey, oranges, cherries, sorghum, soyoil and beef.**



Jim Sutter, USSEC

The U.S.-China trade war has been particularly tough for U.S. sorghum farmers, who became reliant on Chinese imports before both countries began levying punitive tariffs. That’s starting to change, though. China quietly began exempting importers from tariffs on the grain in recent months, spurring sales in February of as much as 443,200 metric tons, according to U.S. industry and government officials. Tim Lust, CEO of National Sorghum Producers, tells *Agri-Pulse* he expects those sales to increase further now that China is broadening the tariff exemptions and extending them through the rest of the year.

But Chinese ports, processors and interior transportation companies have to be open for business for those tariff exemptions to facilitate the expansion of trade China promised under the “phase one” trade pact signed in December before the coronavirus outbreaks.

On that front, there is good news, says Jim Sutter, CEO of the U.S. Soybean Export Council.

“I was just talking ... with our team on the ground in China and they tell me from their perspective soybeans are getting unloaded,” Sutter told *Agri-Pulse*. “Soybean crushing plants are generally running.”

And there are other signs of recovery. Xinhua News, a state-run media outlet, is reporting on business returning to normal with a spotlight on the Wellhope Agri-Tech Stock Company in Shenyang as it churns out poultry and swine feed. Wellhope had returned to 90% production capacity as of Monday, Xinhua says.

One of the reasons behind the government push to return operations to normal is that China isn’t just fighting coronavirus, or COVID-19 as it is now officially called. It’s also fighting African swine fever and food price inflation.

“Feed mills are operating and the Chinese government is really pushing livestock producers to get more meat in the marketplace,” Sutter said. “They’re also importing meat because they want to get prices down. ... They’ve given special dispensation to trucks carrying feed or livestock. They’ve waived tolls on roads to try to make it easy for people to move feed around to be able to produce livestock.”

The situation in China may be looking brighter for grain and oilseed shippers that send their commodities in bulk on Panamax-sized ships, but container transportation is still snarled. U.S. poultry producers and Chinese importers eager to buy the meat continue to be hit hard by the lack of workers available to load and unload ships and individual containers.

Greg Tyler, a senior vice president for the USA Poultry and Egg Export Council, says several hundred containers full of refrigerated poultry — mostly chicken paws that fetch high prices in China — are stuck in ports, waiting to be unloaded and taken to the market.

China only just reopened its market to U.S. poultry after a five-year ban, and USAPEEC had been predicting the new trade would translate into an additional \$1 billion in profits for producers this year.

“I’m just really hoping that the coronavirus will peter out pretty soon,” Tyler said. “As of right now, I’m not optimistic.”

New infections are on the decline in China, according to the World Health Organization, but the country is still besieged by the virus that has already spread to other Asian countries, Europe, North America and elsewhere. On Tuesday WHO Director General Tedros Ghebreyesus said China had reported 129 cases — the lowest rate since Jan. 20.

“Outside China, 1848 cases were reported in 48 countries,” he told reporters in a press briefing. “Eighty percent of those cases are from just three countries — the Republic of Korea, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Italy.”

The U.S. Grains Council is monitoring other key markets in Asia, said Kimberly Atkins, the group’s vice president and chief operating officer.

Meanwhile, U.S. commodity groups are canceling or postponing trade shows and missions in China and elsewhere. The U.S. Meat Export Federation canceled its Korea Spring Market Seminar last month. Stops this month on the 2020 Prune Growers Tour of Asia were canceled, and Sunkist canceled in-store promotions in six Chinese cities that were planned for May.

Many of these marketing events are supported by USDA funds in programs such as the Agricultural Trade Promotion (ATP) program, said Lorena Alfaro, executive director of the U.S. Agricultural Development Council, which conducts weekly meetings with the Foreign Agricultural Service.

“Every day there’s something new,” said Alfaro. “Every other day something gets canceled. China is looking more optimistic — starting to normalize — but that’s not the case in other parts of the world.”

House Democrats in swing districts enthused by Biden's boost

House Democrats who flipped rural congressional districts in 2018 have been bracing for the possibility that U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders - a Vermont Independent who caucuses with Democrats and describes himself as a Democratic Socialist - could be the party's presidential nominee. But those concerned about the potential of Sanders at the top of the ticket may be breathing a sigh of relief after former Vice President Joe Biden's strong showing on Super Tuesday. Biden won at least 9 states voting yesterday, with Maine still too close to call.

In a dramatic turnaround, Biden now leads the Democratic delegate count with 246, compared to Sanders with 229, Sen. Elizabeth Warren with 16 and former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg with 8. But it will be some time before all the votes are tallied and the delegate count is finalized.

Some freshmen members maintain that they will win, regardless of who tops their ticket.

“I can stand on my own two feet,” freshman House Democrat Anthony Brindisi, D-N.Y., told reporters last week, ahead of primaries Tuesday in 16 states and territories.

Brindisi defeated six-year incumbent Republican Claudia Tenney in 2018 in a narrow 50.9% to 49.1% victory. His district voted overwhelmingly for President Donald Trump in 2016.

The GOP has some 31 districts they are targeting to take back the House this election, and Brindisi's is one of them. Trump won the district in 2016 by 15 points over former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Despite Brindisi expressing confidence that he could win even if Sanders were at the top of the ticket, some members fear there could be major implications for swing districts like his.

The vice chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Filemon Vela, D- Texas, is backing former Vice President Joe Biden and told *Agri-Pulse* it would be a bloodbath for Democrats if Sanders is the nominee.

“I think he will swipe the ticket,” Vela said. “There will be so much Democratic vote loss it will make it very difficult for our Democratic members in those districts to overcome.”

Vela expressed confidence that Biden would ultimately win the nomination.

First-term Minnesota Democrat Angie Craig, who was campaigning for Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar before she dropped out of the race and endorsed Biden on Monday, said she was going to let the nominating process play out.



Rep. Angie Craig, D-Minn.

“At the end of the day, it is a complete waste of my time to be a prognosticator on what is going to happen at the Democratic top of the ticket,” Craig said. Craig unseated incumbent Republican Jason Lewis in 2018, receiving 52% of the vote and handing Democrats a key victory.

She and House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson, D-Minn., are also on the GOP's radar, but Peterson has yet to announce whether he is running for reelection, which he normally does after the first of the year.

Some senior members of the committee, such as Jim Costa, D-Calif., who has served a region of California's Central Valley since 2005, are less worried about losing. But that doesn't mean they aren't paying attention to the top of ticket.

"I want to have the strongest possible ticket," the third-generation farmer told *Agri-Pulse* ahead of the Super Tuesday voting. "While Sen. Sanders has done well thus far, there is still 70% or more or less of the voters that prefer someone else, so I think it is premature to get to that point," he said.

With about 75% of the votes counted on Wednesday morning, Sen. Sanders is leading the Democratic primary in California.

Progressive House Democrats have been telling fellow nervous Democrats not to worry.

"Welcome in, the water is warm, and it feels really good," said Washington Rep. Pramila Jayapal, who co-chairs the Progressive Caucus and has endorsed Sanders. "He's speaking to a disaffected working class of every race, including white working-class folks," referring to Sen. Sanders.

While Sanders taking the top of the ticket could affect rural Democrats down the ballot, a Capitol Hill ag lobbyist told *Agri-Pulse* the quality of candidates running against these Democrats must also be taken into consideration.

"It's going to be how far does it carry down ticket, and how much do folks vote straight down the ticket, so it could impact them. But the thing we're not talking about is whether there are quality candidates running against them," the lobbyist said.

Members of the National Farmers Union who were asked about the presidential race said they didn't want to pick a favorite. The group, whose policies are in line with several of the Democratic candidates, held its annual meeting in Savannah, Ga., this week.

"Vice President Biden has had good policies in the past and his voting records really are good for family farmers," Wisconsin Farmers Union President Darin Van Ruden told *Agri-Pulse*.

He also was interested in Sanders' rural policy proposal calling for supply management in agriculture. "That's something we're keeping an eye on," he said.

His group is hosting a forum March 29 inviting Democratic presidential candidates to share their rural policies ahead of the states' primary on April 7. Trump narrowly defeated Hillary Clinton in Wisconsin in 2016.

News Briefs

More funds allocated to protect crops, nurseries, forests and honeybees. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is allocating almost \$70 million to support 386 projects under the Plant Protection Act's Section 7721 program, including 29 projects funded through the National Clean Plant Network. Funds will be used to strengthen the nation's infrastructure for pest detection and surveillance, identification, threat mitigation, to safeguard the nursery production system and to respond to plant pest emergencies. Selected projects will be carried out by universities, states, federal agencies, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofits, and Tribal organizations. Since 2009, USDA has supported more than 4,000 projects and provided nearly \$600 million in funding through the Plant Pest and Disease Management and Disaster Prevention Program. "This program helps USDA build mutually beneficial partnerships with state governments, academic institutions, and other important agricultural cooperators across the country," said Greg Ibach, Undersecretary for USDA's Marketing and Regulatory Programs. "Our cooperators use these USDA funds to conduct critical projects that keep U.S. crops, nurseries, and forests healthy, boost the marketability of agricultural products within the country and abroad." This year, funded projects include, among others: Exotic fruit fly survey and detection: \$5,800,000 in Florida and California; agriculture detector dog teams: \$4,124,783 to programs in California, Florida, and Guam to enhance package inspections, and training for these detector dog teams; honey bee and pollinator health: \$1,728,882 to protect honey bees, bumble bees and other important pollinators from harmful pests; citrus: \$463,280 to support citrus commodity surveys in California and Louisiana. [For a full list of projects by state, click here.](#) USDA is reserving \$15.5 million of the \$70 million in funding to support rapid response during invasive pest emergencies should a pest of high economic consequence be found in the United States. In the past, USDA has used these funds to rapidly respond to pests such as Giant African snail, European cherry fruit fly, coconut rhinoceros beetle, exotic fruit flies, or spotted lanternfly.

Groups seek \$50M for DARPA-like ag program. Nearly three dozen farm groups and university researchers are calling on House and Senate appropriators to fund the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AgARDA), authorized in the 2018 Farm Bill but which has yet to receive any money. **The farm bill "authorized AgARDA to foster research and development that would help to protect the U.S. agriculture and food supply from threats, such as those posed by highly pathogenic African Swine Fever" or the "severe labor shortages experienced by specialty crop growers that are straining their harvest capabilities," the letter to the House and Senate ag appropriations subcommittees says.** AgARDA "will leverage successful public-private partnerships to improve efficiency and accelerate research and development in pursuit of overcoming long-term and high-risk agricultural and food related research and development challenges," the signers said. "With the specialized statutory hiring authorities and alternative contracting vehicles, combined with the strategic planning, and coordination and consultation, AgARDA allows significant achievements to occur more rapidly than in a conventional setting," the letter says, seeking funding at the authorized level of \$50 million. Signers include the American Farm Bureau Federation, American Society of Plant Biologists, American Veterinary Medical Association, National Farmers Union and Soil Science Society of America, among others.

Farm Hands West: Lewis tapped by Almond Board of California

The Almond Board of California has promoted **Josette Lewis** to chief scientific officer. She previously worked in the role of director of agricultural affairs, which she had held since joining the Almond Board in early 2019. Following the retirement of **Karen Lapsley** on July 31, Lewis will assume responsibility for human nutrition and biomass research. Lapsley, who has served the California almond industry for 21 years, has transitioned to the position of senior director of nutrition research, and special projects. She will also continue to oversee biomass research, human nutrition and other special projects until her retirement.



Josette Lewis

Mission Produce has tapped **Mike Browne** to the role of COO. Browne most recently was vice president of fresh operations at Calavo Growers. He brings more than 35 years of experience in the avocado industry, and was president and CEO of Index Fresh.

Mike Omeg has been promoted to director of the business operations department at Orchard View Cherries. Omeg is owner of Omeg Orchards, which formed a partnership with Orchard View in 2018.

Apeel Sciences has appointed **Taylor Sokol** as the company's director of foodservice. Before joining Apeel, Sokol provided strategic foodservice guidance for CAULIPOWER.

National Farmers Union members have chosen **Rob Larew**, a former Capitol Hill staffer and the group's top lobbyist, to be its next president. Larew had been serving as NFU's senior vice president for public policy and communications since 2016. He succeeds **Roger Johnson**, who has retired from the organization. To read more on Larew's background, click [here](#).

Secretary of Agriculture **Sonny Perdue** has selected **Bette Brand** to serve as the deputy undersecretary of rural development following the retirement of **Donald "DJ" LaVoy**. Brand has been serving as administrator of Rural Development's Rural Business Service agency. She came to USDA in January 2018 after 35 years with Farm Credit of the Virginias.



Rob Larew

The Democratic Steering and Policy Committee announced Rep. **Xochitl Torres Small**, D-N.M., will serve on the House Agriculture Committee. Torres Small represents New Mexico's 2nd Congressional District, which is home to nearly 10,000 farms and \$1.6 billion in agricultural revenue. Her district is a top-ten dairy producing district as well as one of the largest producers of nuts. It is also home to a wide range of crops, including cotton, hay, and chile.

The International Dairy Foods Association has named **Joseph Scimeca** senior vice president of regulatory and scientific affairs. Scimeca comes to IDFA after serving 16 years with Cargill,

most recently as the company's vice president of global regulatory and scientific affairs. He has a 33-year career in the global food, beverage and dairy industries, holding leadership positions with Kraft Foods, The Pillsbury Company, and General Mills.

Beth Hughes has left the International Dairy Foods Association, where she worked as the senior director of international affairs. IDFA has not begun the process to hire Hughes' successor. She now serves as the vice president of trade and customs policy at the American Apparel and Footwear Association.



Tina May

Tina May has been promoted to vice president of rural services and chief of staff to CEO **Beth Ford** for Land O'Lakes. She previously was the senior director of sustainability.

Suzy Friedman has left the Environmental Defense Fund, where she worked as the senior director of agricultural sustainability. She now works for the National Alliance of Forest Owners as the vice president of policy.

Sen. **Pat Roberts**, R-Kan., has expanded his staff's portfolio work on the Senate Ag Committee. **Janae Brady**, **Chelsie Keys**, **Matt Erickson**, **Haley Donahue**, and **Chance Hunley** have expanded their respective portfolios. To see their new responsibilities, click [here](#).

Kyle Campbell now serves as a legislative assistant to Rep. **Tom McClintock**, R-Calif., covering the portfolio for agriculture and food, animal welfare, energy, environmental protection, labor and employment, natural resources, science and technology, small business, and transportation. Campbell previously served as a legislative aide.

Andy Harding has been promoted to senior counsel for Sen. **John Barrasso**, R-Wyo., on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Harding works on issues for the committee relating to the Army Corps of Engineers' civil works program, USDA small watershed program, the Endangered Species Act, Ocean Dumping Act, and regional economic development.

Kaylee Niemasik has been promoted to legislative director for Rep. **Katie Porter**, D-Calif. She covers the portfolio for commerce and telecommunications. Niemasik previously served as a legislative counsel for Porter.

Jeff Lopez has been elevated to senior policy adviser for Sen. **Tom Udall**, D-N.M. He covers the portfolio for commerce, trade, labor and employment, small business, transportation, public works, and taxation. He previously was a legislative assistant for Udall.

Rachel Marshall has started as a legislative assistant in the office of Rep. **Jackie Speier**, D-Calif. She covers the portfolio for commerce, finance, and small business.

Nick Martin is now the communications director for Rep. **Suzan DelBene**, D-Wash. He most recently was a director at Forbes Tate Partners LLC.

Craig Wheeler is now the communications director for Rep. **Jaime Herrera Beutler**, R-Wash. He previously was the assistant communications director.

Libby Hogen-Heath has left the U.S. Beet Sugar Association where she served as the director of administration. She has started a new role with the **American Seed Trade Association** as the executive assistant to the executive team.

The National Association of Wheat Growers have selected a new slate of officers at Commodity Classic. 2019 NAWG president and Texas farmer **Ben Scholz** passed the gavel down to vice president **Dave Milligan**, a farmer from Michigan. Washington farmer, **Nicole Berg**, has become the new vice president. **Brent Cheyne**, Oregon farmer, is the new treasurer and Oklahoma farmer, **Keef Felty**, will serve as secretary. Scholz will continue to serve on the executive committee in the role of past president.

The National Wheat Foundation has tapped **David Cleavinger** to serve as the new chairman of the foundation. Cleavinger is a fifth-generation farmer from Texas, who has served the wheat industry for nearly 30 years. He was elected to the Texas Wheat Producers board of directors in 1993 and also joined the National Association of Wheat Growers board of directors. The National Wheat Foundation also welcomed **Gary Broyles** from Montana, as a new member of the board.

Bayer AG selected **Norbert Winkeljohann** to serve as the chairman of the supervisory board. Winkeljohann will succeed **Werner Wenning**, who is stepping down at the end of the annual stockholders' meeting on April 28. Winkeljohann served as chairman of the Board of Management of PricewaterhouseCoopers Europe SE until June 2018 and has been a member of Bayer's Supervisory Board since May 2018.

Founder of Trader Joe's, **Joe Coulombe**, died in Pasadena, Calif., on Feb. 28., at the age of 89. Coulombe opened the first Trader Joe's store in 1967 in Pasadena. Going against conventional industry norms at the time, he moved away from national brands and in 1972 introduced Trader Joe's private label. He retired in 1988.

Best regards,

Sara Wyant
Editor

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