

Smaller farmers are 'left out' of aid programs

California's small-scale specialty crop growers are feeling frustrated and left out by the "lack of inclusion" among federal aid programs. With the close of the food service industry, these farmers were disproportionately hit hardest and struggled with developing new distribution channels for their products and navigating federal programs for the first time.

Paul Towers, the executive director of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), shared these concerns with the California State Board of Food and Agriculture on Tuesday.



A Hmong farmer grows cabbage in the Central Valley.

Following a week of nationwide protests over police brutality, Towers said this was a time to “acknowledge the role that that agriculture has played in this country in historic racism.” He explained that many of these small specialty crop growers are people of color and undocumented workers who are now being “left out of the equation” in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

CAFF is a Davis-based nonprofit organization with about 8,000 members, who farm less than 180 acres – about half the average farm size in California.

Many of those farmers distribute products to community food hubs. Restaurants and other food service businesses had accounted for up to 90% of the business for those food hubs before nearly the entire sector closed down for the pandemic. On top of that, CAFF estimates that shutting down schools cost its growers more than \$100 million in lost sales.

The farmers have also faced uncertainty with farmers' markets, with some closing, some staying open and some later reopening. The restaurants that have been able to reopen in recent weeks have been handling a much smaller share of business and are not yet a stable market.

The growers have not been able to pivot to new markets as easily as larger growers due to technology barriers or a lack of social capital or customer base. Accessing the supply chain for food banks has also been a hurdle.

“The emergency food system leaves smaller farmers out,” said Towers. “It's built around the ability to move large amounts of product quickly. That, unfortunately, often leaves smaller farmers out of emergency food system programs in their communities.”

Aiming to tackle the problem, CAFF set up a donation-based fund, which has now provided \$200,000 in micro grants to 80 farmers, with 90% of those being farmers of color. CAFF has also been performing one-on-one “matchmaking” between buyers and sellers and connecting growers with federal assistance opportunities.



Paul Towers, executive director of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers

Towers said his group has been “pleasantly surprised” with the Paycheck Protection Program, but not others.

“The Economic Injury Disaster loans have been less of a good fit for many of the farmers we work with,” he said, “mostly because the Small Business Administration has been more difficult to work with.”

Towers said the Farmers to Families Food Box program has also been difficult to access for small- to mid-scale growers. Farmers did not discover until after contracts were signed that third-party food safety audits would be required. The cost of an audit, at around \$1,000, can be “a really significant barrier for small farmers and really not necessary,” said Towers. Most of the CAFF growers were already operating on small margins, with less than

\$100,000 in sales annually and often living paycheck to paycheck.

Sara Neagu-Reed, the associate director of federal policy for the California Farm Bureau Federation, was also in the panel discussion for the board meeting and agreed the program has not benefited small- to medium-sized operations.

“(They) don't traditionally work with distributors and don't have existing relationships with any and have probably never partaken in any procurement program out of USDA,” she explained.

Towers added that the community food hubs have been taking advantage of the program, however.

The direct payment program has been just as challenging for smaller specialty crop growers.

“The reimbursement rates are just far too low to make it pencil out for most growers that we work with,” said Towers.

One of those growers lost an entire field of cabbage but would only be reimbursed for \$100. For many, it was hardly worth filling out the paperwork, especially if it meant also having to set up an account for the first time with the local FSA office. If a farmer added acreage this year but was unable to sell that crop, proving the loss was difficult. Many specialty crops with smaller markets, like daikon or bok choy, were not include in the program either, according to Towers.

Thomas Stenzel, the president and CEO of the United Fresh Produce Association and who was also on the panel, clarified that small farmers are still eligible for these programs.

“There are challenges for small farmers, but I don't think they're excluded from these programs,” said Stenzel. “One of the goals, even with the Farmers to Families boxes, was for the local distributors to buy produce from local growers.”

He acknowledged many small growers in California, however, may not have a restaurant food distributor as the main customer.

USDA has struggled with direct payments for specialty crops. Stenzel said that “there just wasn't a system... that makes a lot of sense.”

Staff at the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service told him recently they were able to include some specialty crops and not others because AMS had market news data for those commodities. The agency still expected other growers and producers to demonstrate losses.

“Certainly, USDA appreciates and understands specialty crops – not as well as they do the Midwest, not as well as they do the row crops,” said Stenzel. “But they're learning a lot in this process.”

Towers was optimistic the next federal stimulus package would have more opportunities for smaller growers and that state programs would also better serve the needs of small farmers going forward.

He said much more technical assistance is needed for these farmers at the local level, along the lines of what CDFA has provided in rolling out its Health Soils Program. Towers also pointed out that the California Association of Food Banks' Farm to Family Program has not been inclusive of small- to mid-sized farmers either.

CDFA has been partnering with the food bank association to access its facilities, transportation and logistics in order to break down and distribute the food loads across the state. At the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Newsom administration allocated \$20 million from taxpayer funds to direct purchases at farms. The May Revision for the next budget cycle includes another \$50 million for the initiative.

CDFA Secretary Karen Ross acknowledged the association has been directing farmers with smaller loads to work instead with the local food banks.

“We are very aware of the concern of how more small farmers can participate in the state program, which has limited dollars compared to the food box program,” said Ross. “I don’t have a solution that I’m aware of it. But that has been one of the challenges.”

Water Portfolio to be finalized ‘in coming weeks’

During a meeting of the State Board of Food and Agriculture on Tuesday, Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot said the administration is continuing to advance the Water Resilience Portfolio and plans to complete the policy document soon.



Top photo: Crowfoot at a public forum in 2019.

“It’s important for us to finalize the portfolio so we can really drive forward on a number of its core priorities,” said Crowfoot.

The plan has stalled since the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of California. In January, the administration released a draft of the portfolio, which detailed more than 100 policy actions. The following week, Gov. Gavin Newsom issued his budget proposal for the coming year, complete with an ambitious “climate budget” for funding many of the portfolio actions. Then in February, the

administration unveiled a draft framework for voluntary agreements over Delta flow operations.

The outbreak, however, led the administration to pull nearly every new proposal in the budget. Newsom also launched into a lawsuit over the federal biological opinions, putting a sudden halt to negotiations over voluntary agreements.

In the meeting, Crowfoot acknowledged the budget shortfall would hurt water priorities like helping local communities adapt to the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

“We are doubling down on supporting local communities,” he said. “Specifically, (CDFA Secretary Karen Ross) and I have established an interagency working group, or task force, that is focused on taking measurable action to improve SGMA implementation.”

He said the actions will include making water transfers easier, removing barriers for groundwater recharge and providing local governments with tools for land use planning for fallowed lands. Crowfoot also framed protections for fish as benefiting farmers and ranchers.

“When fish are on the verge of extinction, it creates challenges to water reliability for farmers and ranchers,” he said.

Crowfoot acknowledged the administration’s “need to protect endangered species” has complicated the voluntary agreements and efforts to move toward “a paradigm of collaboration” and away from litigation. He said the goal of the administration is to settle the multiple lawsuits over both the biological opinions and the state’s new operating plan for the State Water Project “as quickly as possible.”

“We actually think that conditions are right to explore whether we can settle out these issues,” he said. “I know it's been discouraging for many in the agricultural community to witness all of this litigation and, in some cases, name calling from certain stakeholders.”

Board President Don Cameron reminded Crowfoot that time is critical when it comes to water right now.

“We do hope that that the near term is near term, when you talk about reaching that agreement,” said Cameron.

Crowfoot said he is optimistic, seeing potential in the strong working relationships between the state and federal agencies on pumping operations. He said settling the legal dispute would create momentum for turning the February framework on voluntary agreements into a legally enforceable agreement.



“I've never seen as much litigation from everybody as is currently happening,” said Board member Don Bransford.

He urged the administration to prioritize the voluntary agreements in order for California agriculture to continue supplying food to the nation during the pandemic. Earlier in his presentation, Crowfoot pointed out how the snowpack this spring has been significantly lower than average.

Bransford also raised concerns over the portfolio being too broad, which Crowfoot acknowledged has been a challenge.

“Failure would be if we got incremental improvements on 60 different priorities that actually don't get anything done,” said Crowfoot, adding that the agencies are currently trimming that list down to a few top priorities.

Don Cameron, president of the State Board of Food and Agriculture

This addresses another hurdle with the portfolio as well: the disconnect between agencies, he said.

Crowfoot reminded the board that the administration is pursuing the portfolio approach as a complement to the voluntary agreements and that settlement will not be “a silver bullet.” Agriculture will continue to face challenges with SGMA and with aging and crippled infrastructure even after agreements are signed. But he assured the board the administration is aware of this, as Ross has reminded them in every meeting.

“Agriculture has stepped up in such a big way during the pandemic,” said Crowfoot. “Everybody up to the governor understands just how essential agriculture is to the future of our state.”

During a session later in the meeting, board members debated the language of a letter it planned to send to the administration to encourage it to settle the lawsuits and return to the negotiating table.

Ross chimed in with a point about the voluntary agreements continuing behind closed doors. She advised the board to include a statement on that in the letter, such as this: “There is a deep concern within the agricultural community in the state that they’re not seeing enough visibility of that kind of work.”

California continues to lead the nation in farm receipts

The latest snapshot of California agriculture reveals that the 69,400 farms and ranches across the Golden State generated almost \$50 billion in cash receipts from over 400 commodities in 2018, a slight increase over 2017, according to Karen Ross, Secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

“Exports for California agricultural products topped \$21 billion for an increase over the prior year, as well,” she noted in the [California Agricultural Statistics Review](#), which was published Tuesday.

Top 5 Agricultural States in Crop Cash Receipts, 2018

Rank	State	Crop Cash Receipts \$1,000
	United States	373,498,863
1	California	49,915,493
2	Iowa	27,668,804
3	Texas	21,816,059
4	Nebraska	21,317,654
5	Minnesota	17,256,128

Source: ERS

California remained the leading state in cash farm receipts in 2018 with combined commodities representing over 13 percent of the U.S. total. California’s leading crops remained fruits, nuts and vegetables. Over a third of the country’s vegetables and two-thirds of the country’s fruits and nuts are grown in California.

California’s top-10 valued commodities for 2018:

- Dairy Products, Milk — \$6.37 billion
- Grapes — \$6.25 billion
- Almonds — \$5.47 billion
- Cattle and Calves — \$3.19 billion
- Pistachios — \$2.62 billion
- Strawberries — \$2.34 billion
- Lettuce — \$1.81 billion
- Floriculture — \$1.22 billion
- Tomatoes — \$1.20 billion
- Oranges — \$1.12 billion

Fresno County - with hefty production of almonds, pistachios, livestock and table grapes - led the state in terms of value of agricultural production at slightly over \$7.9 billion, a 12.6% increase. Kern County, which topped the list last year, was second in value of production with \$7.47 billion, a 3.0 percent increase from 2017. Tulare County was third in value, with an increase of 2.3 percent in production to \$7.21 billion.

California accounts for 40% of all organic production in the U.S. and organic sales continue to grow in the state. In 2018, sales of organic products in California totaled more than \$10 billion, which represents an increase of 29% from 2017.

Similar to other states, the number of farms declined slightly (1.6%), and the amount of land in farms also decreased slightly to 24.3 million acres in 2018. The average farm size was 350 acres in 2018, up from 2017, but still below the national average of 443 acres.

The average value of California farm real estate increased in 2018 to \$9,350 per acre, up 4.2 percent from 2017. Irrigated cropland’s value increased 4.4 percent to \$14,300 per acre and non-irrigated cropland increased 7.4 percent to \$5,090 per acre. The value of all cropland increased 4.6 percent to \$12,170. The value of pastureland increased 1.1 percent to \$2,810 per acre. The rental rate of irrigated cropland increased to \$528 per acre, up from \$510 per acre in 2017. Pastureland rental rates increased from 2017 rental rates, up to \$13.00 per acre in 2018 from \$12.00 in 2017.

California agricultural statistics derive primarily from USDA’s/National Agricultural Statistics Services reports. CDFA collaborates with the University of California at Davis to produce [statistics for California agricultural exports](#). For county-level reporting please see the CDFA [County Liaison site](#). Initial crop statistics for 2019 are expected later this year.

Notable Increases in California Production:

Beans, Cranberry	260%
Sunflower, Non-Oil.....	68%
Pistachios	64%
Sunflower, All	49%
Sunflower, Oil	49%
Beans, Baby Lima	43%
Haylage and Greenchop, Alfalfa.....	38%
Melons, Honeydew	37%
Safflower.....	35%
Beans, Garbanzo.....	28%

Notable Decreases in California Production:

Olives.....	-72%
Cherries, Sweet.....	-54%
Chili Peppers	-44%
Oats	-35%
Pecans.....	-26%
Lettuce, Romaine	-25%
Lettuce, Leaf.....	-23%
Squash	-21%
Cotton, Upland.....	-20%
Beans, Large Lima Dry.....	-17%

Source: [California Agricultural Statistics Review](#)

Calif. appellate court weighs arguments in Roundup case

Lawyers for Monsanto and Dewayne Lee Johnson squared off Tuesday before a California appeals court over whether he should be compensated for exposure to Roundup that he claims caused his Non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

Johnson’s was the first of three such cases to go to trial. A jury initially awarded him \$289 million, including \$250 million in punitive damages, but the trial judge in the case reduced the total award to \$78.5 million. The other two cases, which also resulted in jury verdicts for the plaintiffs, are on appeal.

The company has asked the court to reverse the verdict or reverse it and send the case back to the trial court. Johnson is seeking reinstatement of the \$250 million in punitive damages.

The case is seen as significant because Bayer, which bought Monsanto in 2018 for \$63 billion, is facing more than 50,000 such complaints and is reportedly on the verge of reaching a final agreement with lawyers to settle them for \$10 billion.

The arguments focused on whether federal law preempts the jury’s finding that Monsanto had negligently failed to warn consumers of the dangers of Roundup, specifically its cancer-causing properties, and whether noneconomic damages of \$33 million should be reduced to \$1.5 million, as sought by Monsanto.

Monsanto attorney David Axelrad also argued to the appellate court that the jury’s finding of a “design defect” in the product was in fact a “failure to warn” claim preempted by the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act.

Changing the product label to require a cancer warning is preempted by FIFRA, Axelrad said. EPA has said Roundup labels cannot include cancer warnings.

He also argued that at the time Johnson was using Roundup, the scientific consensus and all worldwide regulatory bodies had concluded Roundup did not cause cancer. In early 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer determined glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup, probably causes cancer in humans, sparking a surge in lawsuits against Monsanto.

But Michael Miller, the attorney representing the former school groundskeeper Johnson, said the company knew of the dangers of its product well before Johnson’s diagnosis of NHL in August 2014, but the company failed to follow up with recommended testing.

In addition, Monsanto “ghost wrote” articles signed by researchers asserting Roundup’s safety, Miller said.

Axelrad also argued against Johnson receiving \$1 million per year for 33 years in noneconomic damages because at the time of trial in 2018, he was expected to live only one and a half more years. Johnson is still alive.

“While there was a chance he would die in November 2019, Mister Johnson could live for years or decades with this problem,” Miller said.

Prospects dim for H-2A wage rate reforms, farm groups say

A White House effort to lower the wages farms have to pay H-2A workers appears to have foundered amid concerns that it would put some regions at a disadvantage to others.

There also were concerns that an effort to cut wages looked bad at a time when workers on farms and in food processing plants were being hit by widespread outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus.

A widely circulated National Public Radio story disclosed in April that the White House chief of staff, Mark Meadows, was working with Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue on a plan to lower H-2A wage rates. The program’s “adverse effect wage rate,” or AEWR, which determines the minimum amount that farms are required to pay, has been rising sharply in recent years, with double-digit annual increases in some states.

But Chuck Conner, president and CEO of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, said the administration had been looking at tying the H-2A rates to local and state minimum wages, which could exacerbate regional disparities.

“We’ve been arguing for a long time that we need a change to that (AEWR) formula in order to keep wages within, you know, the same limits as what other industries were facing. With the administration’s effort we were pretty quick to also say while we appreciated the effort we did not feel like the path that they were on tying it to the minimum wage ... was going to be fair,” he told *Agri-Pulse*.

Conner said the White House effort appeared to be dead at this point. Tying the H-2A wages to state and local minimum wage rates would have been especially unfair to California.

“This just created a lot of problems, a lot of regional problems, obviously California really was adversely affected in a big way,” Conner said.



Chuck Conner, NCFC

California’s minimum wage is \$13 an hour, the highest in the nation except for the District of Columbia’s \$14 an hour, and is set to rise to \$15 an hour by 2022. In many other states, the minimum is the same as the federal requirement, \$7.25 an hour.

The White House didn’t respond to a request for comment on the proposal.

Another farm group leader, who didn’t want his name used, said the timing of the White House effort was bad, too, coming as the pandemic was hitting farms.

“This approach would have been a messaging disaster and likely would result in litigation that would impede the relief anyway. If the end game were actual grower relief, there are better ways,” the official said.

The official also said if the administration really wanted to overhaul the AEW to lower rates, it should have been included in a Labor Department proposal issued last year.

Under the department’s plan, the AEW rate would continue to be set based on a USDA survey of farm wages, and the American Farm Bureau Federation argued that there were new provisions that would actually push the AEW even higher in some areas for small and medium-size farms.

The H-2A rates rose 6% on average this year to \$13.99, and some states saw increases of up to 10%. The AEW for Ohio, Indiana and Illinois rose 10% to \$14.52 an hour and 9% in Missouri and Iowa to \$14.58 an hour.

Zippy Duvall, the president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, also said the COVID-19 crisis made it difficult to pursue reforms that would lower the AEW rates.

“We’re going to continue to work on that, but in this environment where everybody looks like they’re threatened on the front line and they’re risking their life going to work, I mean, of course that’s not a popular thing to talk about,” Duvall said of AEW reforms.



Zippy Duvall, American Farm Bureau Federation

Sara Neagu-Reed, associate director of federal policy for the California Farm Bureau, said policy makers should "focus on other priorities to help both our farmers and their employees, such as providing more

funding for PPE (personal protective equipment) resources for our growers and ensuring agriculture, along with the medical sector employees, are receiving these resources ASAP. Keeping our workforce safe is our priority."

Despite farm groups' ongoing concerns about the wage rates, they have generally praised the administration for steps taken during the coronavirus outbreak to ensure that farms could obtain H-2A workers this year.

The State Department eased interview visa requirements in Mexico after consulates were closed there in March, and the Labor Department issued a temporary rule in April to allow farms to hire H-2A workers who were already in the country, something previously prohibited.

"We have some isolated spots across the country that we've had some problems (getting workers) but overall, we've been pretty good," said Duvall.

Nearly 90% of H-2A workers originate from Mexico, but travel issues from other key countries have presented challenges in getting workers to American operations.

One of the biggest lingering problems is with custom harvesting contractors, who normally hire about 4,000 H-2A workers from South Africa, said Michael Marsh, president and CEO of the National Council of Agricultural Employers.

Meanwhile, soaring unemployment rates in the United States have led to calls by some conservatives in Congress for shutting down guest worker programs on the basis that there are plenty of Americans to take those jobs.

Marsh's group has started surveying state employment agencies to see whether domestic demand for agricultural positions has increased this spring. Among six or seven states that have responded so far, that hasn't been the case, he said. Virginia, for example, reported referring just two people to farms for job openings. Idaho has reported three referrals.

"There does not seem to be a huge clamor for these unemployed domestic workers who want to come out to do the jobs on the farm," he said.

Struggling restaurants eyed to fight hunger with food surplus

Restaurants across the country are working hard to get back to normal, farmers have lost valuable food service markets and a growing number of unemployed workers struggle to purchase food because of COVID-19. However, lawmakers are looking at ways to address these triple threats by helping restaurants serve meals to the needy.

A key proposal is the Food Supply Protection Act, which was introduced by Senate Agriculture Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., and the other Democrats on the Senate Ag Committee.

Some \$1.5 billion of the \$8 billion bill, provisions of which could be included in a major coronavirus aid bill the Senate is expected to consider in coming weeks, would go toward providing grants and reimbursement to groups that buy surplus food and increase donations to food banks, schools, and nonprofits. Restaurants also would be eligible to serve surplus food products.



Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich.

While restaurants would be eligible to serve surplus food products, Stabenow told *Agri-Pulse* the bill is focused on helping people supplying the restaurants.

“The big bottleneck, though, is in the folks who are producing, processing and packaging food that is going to the restaurants,” she said, adding she's happy to partner with restaurants on how food is distributed to food banks and reimbursing them for their efforts.

World Central Kitchen, a group founded by Chef José Andrés to help restaurants provide meals to victims of natural disasters, is one of the bill's backers. One of WCK's recipients is Lucille's, a popular restaurant in Houston. Chef Chris Williams started providing 335 meals a day to the needy on Monday under what was originally supposed to be a two-week contract with WCK that has now been extended indefinitely.

The Houston Food Bank provides ingredients for the meals. Funding from WCK offsets a small portion of the restaurant's cost of preparing and serving the meals.

After the pandemic hit in March, Williams had already begun looking for ways to help with the city. **“We were giving it to first responders. I’m talking about thousands of meals,” he told *Agri-Pulse*. “At least once a week, two times on that day, we go out and deliver to a couple of hospitals and give them like 200 meals at a time.”**

The restaurant industry lost more than \$80 billion in sales in March and April and laid off more than 8 million workers, according to the National Restaurant Association. The group and its allies argue a longer-term financial approach is needed as the industry struggles to recover.

Katherine Miller, vice president of impact at the James Beard Foundation, which also supports the Stabenow bill, said it could take some local restaurants a year and a half to return to normal operations.

“For the restaurant industry as a whole, what we’re looking at is 12-18 months of a full economic recovery that is going to need to be supported by every aspect of the federal government,” Miller told *Agri-Pulse*.

She said some 1% of independent restaurants, or about 4,500 establishments across the country, have permanently closed, and most restaurants are very hesitant to reopen at anything less than 50% capacity.

On top of that, more than 5 million of the industry's 11 million employees began collecting unemployment checks when restaurants began shutting down, she said. **“We know that the economic hit on our supply chain was huge,” Miller said.**

But she said some restaurants have been supplying meals and serving as relief kitchens during the pandemic, which provides its own benefits.

“Feeding centers, the relief meals that about 30% of restaurants have provided to their communities, have allowed people to go back to work, feed the most vulnerable, and kept the supply chain running,” Miller said.

The National Council of Farmer Cooperatives is one of several farm groups backing Stabenow’s bill. NCFC President Chuck Conner told *Agri-Pulse* there could be conflicts between how much flexibility should be given to the secretary of agriculture to distribute funds.

“They’ve got to work that out and have the proper balance of congressional approval and oversight, versus the latitude that any secretary needs to sort of meet the needs out there and put a program in place,” he said. Conner thinks the bill has a fairly good chance of passing in some form.

One of the largest farm groups in the country, the American Farm Bureau Federation, has not thrown support behind Stabenow’s bill.

“As with many bills being introduced right now, there are provisions in it that would be beneficial to agriculture. That said, we think there are better approaches, such as the Farming Support to States Act,” Andrew Walmsley, AFBF director of congressional relations told *Agri-Pulse*.

That bill was introduced by Sens. Susan Collins, R-Maine, Angus King, Ind.-Maine, and Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., and would provide money to states to help fund COVID-19 pandemic response efforts in agriculture and the rest of the food supply chain.

Walmsley expects many different approaches “that have merit” to be rolled into a broader package.

Stabenow also wants to see a 15% funding increase in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits folded into a larger package. **“It’s certainly the most efficient way to help families right now, many of whom have never needed to worry about putting food on the table for their families,” she said.**

The National Restaurant Association is also encouraging Congress to pass a bill introduced by Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., and Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., expanding the Restaurant Meals Program to serve SNAP participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It would also give USDA the authority to temporarily waive requirements for states and restaurants to quickly participate.



Chris Williams, executive chef at Lucille’s in Houston, unloads meals prepared by his restaurant.

Thousands of aging dams need 'urgent and extensive' attention

Last Sunday, as National Dam Safety Awareness Day came and went, few Americans pondered a possible disaster looming in an aging dam upstream from them.

In fact, the country's reservoirs, large and small, pose an escalating threat of engulfing or damaging towns, homes, farmsteads, processing plants, livestock facilities, highways, bridges, and any other parts of rural America downstream from many of the nation's 91,500 dams.

But lately, nature has lobbed a few large caliber warning shots.

- In May, torrents of rain pouring into Wixon Lake in Michigan overtopped the 95-year-old Edenville Dam, causing another downstream dam to fail as well and requiring evacuations of thousands of people. Dam safety officials had long warned of the dam's inadequate spillway capacity.
- In March 2019, a surging ice flow on Nebraska's Niobrara River overtopped and destroyed the century-old Spencer Dam and its hydropower plant, drowning a homeowner, inundating buildings and damaging several bridges downstream.
- In February 2017, two spillways of California's Oroville Dam, the nation's tallest at 770 feet, frayed and then collapsed, bringing the whole 50-year-old dam to near failure, causing evacuation of 200,000 downstream residents, requiring \$1 billion in repairs, and generating at least \$1 billion in suits by home and business owners.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) sums up its appraisal of the condition of U.S. dams with a grade of D and declares the country's dams need urgent and extensive attention. Their average age is 56 years, and in five years 70% of them will be over 50 years old. One in six is classified as high hazard, which means people are living below a large reservoir restrained by a high dam. Another one in eight of the dams pose "significant hazard potential," threatening significant economic losses to downstream infrastructure, including farms.

U.S Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) adds a worrisome estimate that no emergency action plan (EAP) has been done for nearly 20% of the high-hazard dams.

Nor is the challenge of fixing up dams going to wait. Climate experts' outlook, including the 2018 White House National Climate Assessment, point to the rising frequency of record-setting rains and other severe weather events. The White House report warns that deteriorating dams "represent an increasing hazard when exposed to extreme or, in some cases, even moderate rainfall."

The near catastrophe at the Oroville Dam made that point clearly to the nation's dam safety officials.

Liza Whitmore, a California Department of Water Resources official, says the Feather River watershed above the dam had record rainfall in the two months preceding the spillways failure sending "an entire year's average runoff – 4.4 million acre-feet – in 50 days" into the reservoir.



Lisa Whitmore, CA DWR

She explains that the dam is listed as high hazard solely because of the large population downstream population, and it is inspected annually to ensure it meets all ACE

safety standards. **But the DWR has done “an in-depth assessment” and revisions to its dam safety program, she says, and reconstructed the 50-year-old dam to today’s top engineering practices, which “has left Oroville Dam with two of the most robust flood outlets in the world.”**

Across the nation, “there has been great success in the periodic inspection of dams, especially high-hazard potential dams ... and many dams are successfully upgraded and repaired every year,” reports Katelyn Riley, communications manager for the Association of State Dam Safety Officials (ASDSO). “But there still are over 2,300 high-hazard potential dams ... with a condition rating of either poor or unsatisfactory” in the ACE’s National Inventory of Dams maintained, she says.

Further, all sort of development and population growth continue below most dams of significance, and the ACE says those downstream population increases have added 1,600 dams to the high-hazard category in just the last decade.

Despite the mounting risks with big dams, many small dams on farms and ranches across the country fail every year but cause no fatalities nor big disasters.

“We do have dams that fail every year; smaller dams on ranches and ... farm ponds,” or small ones managed by irrigation districts, towns or other local entities, says Tim Gokie, chief engineer for the Dam Safety Section of the Nebraska Department of Natural Resources.

“Unfortunately, for most people, when it comes to their dams ... it’s always been there, out there in the pasture, and I don’t know that they pay attention to it,” he says.

But folks do face personal losses and lose their water supply, Gokie says, because the typical spillways for small dams – a big corrugated metal pipe under the dams earthen embankment – have not been checked and are rusting out.

The pipes usually rust out along the bottom, and the reservoir forces water through the rusted holes at the bottom of the pipe, Gokie explains. “Once that process starts, it doesn’t take very long ... until you have a hole all the way through the dam on the outside of the pipe. It can unravel really quickly and you get a dam failure,” he says.

Gokie’s team inspects all Nebraska spillways every five years, and because of the advanced age of most metal spillways “we are finding more and more of those holes. The key ... is to catch it early,” he advises.

There is help for farmers who want to fix up or rebuild an old farm and ranch pond, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program may be the best first USDA stop for a farmer or rancher wanting to rebuild an old dam or prevent its failure. **EQIP contracts from the USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service can fund up to 75% of watershed management project costs to rehab a farm pond, for example, or repair an irrigation canal or irrigation pipeline,**

In fact, the 2018 farm bill expanded EQIP to allow contracts for water management entities when they support a water conservation or irrigation efficiency project that will benefit private agricultural producers’ water supplies. The newly eligible entities can be a state, irrigation

district, ground water management district, or other local community water entity. The contract can apply to dams when they involve an entire watershed in a conservation project. NRCS advises, however, that grants under the expanded eligibility won't be available until new rules for EQIP are finalized.

Meanwhile, NRCS's main small watershed program has been helping farmers and ranchers with dams for farm water supply, conservation, irrigation, and flood control for about 70 years.

One result is the accumulation of 12,000 small dams nationwide that NRCS (and its forerunner agency) helped build and now tries to help owners maintain. Not only are those dams filling with sediment and their spillways rusting out, but all sorts of development continues below them.

So, an NRCS watershed expert explains, the number of high-hazard dams under the agency's watch has climbed to nearly 2,100, more than double when the ponds were developed decades ago.

Five years ago, NRCS invited proposals for dam rehabs, received 393 requests, and has since been divvying up funds to towns, counties, water managements and irrigation districts and so forth, at a pace of about \$30 million annually in most recent years. NRCS dollars usually cover about 65% of project costs.

For Fiscal Year 2020, the agency awarded \$25 million for a range of dam rehab projects, at about \$2 million to \$3 million each for construction, and grants in various amounts for project feasibility assessments and planning.

Nationwide, ASDSO estimated in 2019 that the costs to rehabilitate just high-hazard dams now in unsatisfactory condition would cost the nation at least \$23 billion.

The Corps and the Federal Emergency Management Agency help communities repair and replace failed dams and rehab deteriorating ones. Adoratia Purdy, an ACE public affairs specialist, says the Corps has been spending \$350 million annually, on average, for several years, on dam safety studies, maintenance, and construction of dams.

FEMA, meanwhile, has the National Dam Safety Program that works with public and private dam owners, plus a grant program to help rehab old high-hazard dams. FEMA kicked in \$333 million, for example, toward rebuilding the Oroville Dam spillways and related repairs and replacements in 2017 and 2018.

So far, this year's economic stimulus bills haven't provided funds for fixing small dams. Rep. Abigail Spanberger, who chairs and U.S. House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry, tells *Agri-Pulse*, however, "the issue of repairing and rebuilding small dams in our rural areas is one of critical importance and urgency, particularly as extreme climate conditions exacerbate flooding and droughts." The NRCS watershed program "must remain part of this important debate" if the House takes up a further large-scale infrastructure package, she added.



Tim Gokie, Nebraska Department of Natural Resources

News Briefs

Mask shortage prompts EPA guidance. Pesticide handlers may have to use expired respirators or reuse N95 respirators due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to temporary guidance issued by EPA Monday. Addressing the shortage of respirators, the agency said that before considering those options, growers or applicators must exhaust other options, including the use of alternative NIOSH-approved respirators that offer equivalent or greater respiratory protection than those required on the pesticide label. Growers also should look to hire commercial applicator services that have enough respirators; try to use pesticides that do not require respirators; or delay pesticide applications “until another compliant option is available,” EPA said. “It is imperative that pesticide applicators wear respiratory protection to protect their health when required by the pesticide product label,” the guidance says. “Use of respiratory protection is particularly important when mixing, loading and applying pesticides, because those occupational scenarios typically have the highest exposure potential.”

Retail dairy sales on the rise. As businesses closed their doors and stay-at-home orders were put in place, consumers purchased more dairy products, the National Milk Producers Federation says. According to reports by IRI — a consumer market research company — milk sales for the period from March 8 to March 22 were up 43% from last year, while butter doubled, yogurt rose 31%, ice cream grew 40% and cheese jumped 76%. Dairy sales fell from March 23 to May 17, but remained 25% higher than the previous year. While COVID-19 may have prompted an increase in the retail purchase of dairy products, sales to restaurants, schools and cafeterias have dropped, leading to reductions in forecast milk prices. The USDA monthly forecast for milk prices dropped from \$18.25 per hundredweight in March to \$14.35 per hundredweight in April. In May, it rose to \$14.55 per hundredweight.

Farm Hands West: Dumas leaves Del Monte

Danny Dumas has decided to leave Del Monte Fresh Produce N.A., Inc., effective May 29. Dumas has been with Del Monte for the past 20 years and has served in many leadership roles including vice president of operations for Europe & Africa and vice president of North America sales and product management. **Annunciata (Nucci) Cerioli** has expanded her responsibilities from SVP, operations, North America to include sales and product management for North America and has also been promoted to the new role of senior vice president, North America which was effective May 13.

The Almond Board of California has submitted names to the Department of Agriculture for positions on its board. The individuals are as follows: **Paul Ewing, Joe Gardiner, Alexi Rodriguez, Ron Fisher, Darren Rigg, Chad DeRose, George Goshgarian Jr., Christine Gemperle, Bill Morecraft, and Alicia Rockwell.**

Houston Wilson has been named the presidential director for the University of California’s Organic Agriculture Institute. Wilson is a UC Riverside agricultural entomologist located at the Kearney



Houston Wilson

Agricultural Research and Extension Center. Wilson joined UC ANR as assistant Cooperative Extension specialist in 2017. The Organic Agriculture Institute was established in January 2020 with a \$500,000 endowment by Clif Bar and a matching \$500,000 endowment from UC President **Janet Napolitano**.

Shanley Farms has hired **Patrinka Crammond** to work in business and program development. Crammond brings many years of experience in the produce industry, most recently working for Savor Fresh Farms Kiss Melon program in sales and retail program development.

Tom Oliveri passed away on May 28 at the age of 67. He was known to many as Tommy O, and served four decades at the Western Growers (WG). He retired from the association in January 2018. He spent many years focusing on the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA). Oliveri started his agriculture career in college as an inspector for the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Standardization Program. He earned his degree in agricultural biology from Cal Poly Pomona in 1977, soon after he began a job as a grower field representative for WG.



Tom Oliveri

Christa Lachenmayr, a senior agricultural economist at the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, has been appointed the commission's liaison to the Department of Agriculture. She holds degrees from the University of Wisconsin and American University and works in CFTC's Division of Market Oversight, with responsibility to analyze new futures contracts and compliance with the Commodity Exchange Act. CFTC also announced the hiring of **Darryl Blakey** as an associate director in the Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs. Blakey most recently handled market regulatory issues for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. To read more about the hires, click [here](#).



Christa Lachenmayr

Swen Neufeldt has been named group vice president and president of Hormel Foods International Corp., succeeding **Larry Vorpahl**, who announced his retirement after 34 years with the company. Vorpahl joined Hormel Foods in 1986 and held several senior-level positions in product management, marketing and sales during his career. Neufeldt previously served as the vice president of meat product and marketing at Hormel's refrigerated foods division. He started his career with Hormel Foods in grocery products sales and product management.

Carrie Vicenta Meadows is settling into her role as the new agricultural adviser to Administrator **Andrew Wheeler** at the Environmental Protection Agency. She succeeds **Tate Bennett**, who is now the special assistant to President **Donald Trump** for agriculture and agricultural trade. Vicenta Meadows previously served as the chief of staff to Rep. **Dan Newhouse**, R-Wash.

The World Food Program USA has added **Sandra Lee** to its board of directors to help increase awareness and fundraising for WFP. Lee has been a lifelong humanitarian and activist, first beginning her fight against hunger in 1985 after witnessing poverty and hunger on a trip to the Africa. WFP also added **Molly Finn**, current chief compliance officer for eBay, to its board of directors to help support WFP USA's advocacy and fundraising on behalf of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

Tom Wise now is a senior advisor for the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, focusing on fair and sustainable food systems. Wise is a senior research fellow at Tufts University. IATP is located in Minneapolis, but Wise will continue to work from Massachusetts and keep his position at Tufts.

The Food Industry Association has appointed **Krystal Register** to lead health and well-being initiatives for the association. She will also serve as the issue expert on all health and well-being and nutrition policy, operations, and communication issues for FMI members. Register has been a long-time Wegmans Food Markets retail dietitian.

The Equitable Food Initiative has promoted **Kenton Harmer** to the new position of managing director. Harmer has served as EFI's director of certification and impact since 2013, working to build relationships that allowed EFI to certify fresh produce farms for industry best practices.

Almark Foods has selected **Rick Anderson** to be the new CEO, effectively immediately. Anderson was most recently the CEO of Gold Coast Bakeries and brings more than 20 years of experience in the food manufacturing industry.

Drew Wallace now serves as Sen. **Tom Udall's**, D-N.M., chief of staff. He previously was the legislative director.

Best regards,

Sara Wyant
Editor

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