

Are We Watching a Renaissance in Agriculture?

by Mary Silveira



It takes cooperation, a collaborative effort and a joint venture of individuals putting their eggs in one basket, so to speak, to come up with an economically viable result. It takes bringing hardworking people together to achieve goals that make them successful without intervention from outside sources for product, processing, packaging, transportation and marketing. That cooperation, that working together and acting together mutually for a common goal and benefit is a cooperative.

Cooperatives are not anything unusual or new to agriculture. We have, for years, expected direction and assistance from the U.C. Davis Cooperative Extension, which has

Gardner Program, Grazing Program, Farm Water Quality Program, 4-H, Viticulture, Watershed and Natural Resources and many other programs. Through COOPERATION, they bring together agriculture to its end result of providing food, fiber and floral products to the people.

Cooperatives, in general, are meant to enhance the opportunities for the individual consumer and the supplier. What better way than through this process does the American dream truly become a reality with benefits to all?

In July 2008, the Central Coast Agriculture Cooperative (CCAC) was created to coordinate a distribution system to supply the market for local

platform for food buyers to easily review and select from the producers' assorted products; 4) Promote the value-added benefits to retailers and institutions using CCAC food products.

By coordinating its cooperative, a synergism is created that works for the benefit of all without taking away from personal ownership, nor limiting the participant's wealth. Within the cooperative, products can be sold at the price the grower sets and delivered within two days of purchase. Products can sell at a time that is financially advantageous to the members and at price points that are beneficial, allowing decision-making to stay with the producers only.

The cooperative only supplies the service of the website, coordinating the pickup and delivery within the cooperative and the individual, thus eliminating the middleman.

Debra Garrison, CCAC CEO

Debra Garrison, CCAC CEO since October 2008, discusses several reasons to join this local cooperative.

"The essential business of the association is to provide local farm and ranch members with a direct-to-retail distribution system where their products can be conveniently purchased and delivered from a single source. Each product sold has a story behind it and can be traced right back to where it was grown."

As a member-owned nonprofit California Agriculture Cooperative, Garrison says, "CCAC is committed to developing a vibrant agriculture community by offering an exchange from local producers to local food buyers for goods and services that are grown, produced and distributed



Central Coast Agriculture Cooperative (CCAC) CEO Deb Garrison (left) and Board of Directors Rod Schroeder, Coco Collelmo, Maria Weinerth, Randy Rogers, George Kendall. Not pictured are Elizabeth Poett and Eric Micheilssen.

been our local link to research, information and expertise from the University of California. The advisors and staff of this cooperative have worked directly with people in San Luis Obispo County and the Central Coast to solve problems in areas of agriculture with the Master

foods. The purpose of CCAC is to provide services to members to 1) Share in the benefits of collectively marketing their diverse assortment of locally grown food products; 2) Promote consistent best practices and food safety guidelines within local farm productions; 3) Provide a

locally, in a sustainable, equitable, and responsible manner.

“We believe that one of the ways to help preserve and enrich the rural character of the Central Coast is to keep local farmers and ranchers in production. To remain economically viable, local growers need to have local markets for their food products. By identifying how and by whom products are grown in the local area, food buyers are given more freedom of choice and an opportunity to support the local economy.”

How many members are in the cooperative and how are they kept informed on what is going on?

“Membership in CCAC is open to any regional farm or ranch with a demonstrated history of producing good, healthy local foods and a willingness to adopt safe and beneficial growing, raising and processing practices in Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties.

“After a year of planning this exciting new model of distributing local foods direct to retail, we recently started our membership campaign. There are a number of documents that producers are asked to understand and adhere to as a member of CCAC for quality assurance and food safety. They include practices that promote the longterm health of our farm and ranch land (farm plans), and compliance with federal, state and county laws pertaining to distributing food products.”

When prospective members complete a membership application, Garrison says each application is thoroughly reviewed by the CCAC Board of Directors for qualifications. Currently the association has 10 farm and ranch members. CCAC has hired three staff members: a production/operations manager, a butcher/truck driver and a financial manager.

“Production staff assists and communicates with members to coordinate distribution of their products and offers help with crop planning for future orders. The butcher assists



Front to back: Eric Micheilssen, Maria Weinerth, Judy Starr, Chris Frietas, Ian Farmer, Dan Sutton, Brycen Ikeda (partially hidden).

ranches to set up receiver sites for the mobile meat harvest (MHU) that adhere to Temple Grandin humane harvest guidelines and USDA compliance, drives the MHU to ranch sites, delivers meat carcasses to a local cut-and-wrap facility for further processing and carries out all necessary compliance regulations for food safety. The financial manager keeps track of member retains/revolving funds, creates reports, invoices customers, manages receivables and makes sure all members receive checks promptly.”

CCAC Focus

Top priorities for the CCAC are the following:

- Educate our public about the benefit of purchasing healthy, locally grown food products.
 - Sustain the viability of our local farmers and ranchers and their working landscapes by giving them additional markets.
 - Be the real deal when it comes to being earth-friendly and green.
- Organizational goals are listed below:
- Supply local food products to local markets and then to other regional markets; planned growth.

- Prioritize offerings of educational and marketing services to smaller family and limited-resource farmers and ranchers.

“As a member of a multigenerational family farm here in San Luis Obispo County” Garrison says, “my passion is to help preserve our area’s farms and ranches by creating more alternative local markets to rebuild a strong community food shed.

“Growing food is not an easy way to make a living. For many it is a way of life that is honored and enjoyed by men and women, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, sometimes for generations and sometimes for the first time as a second career. Historically, local agriculture has diversified and strengthened our local economy.

“Generations ago, when most food was produced locally, farmers and ranchers who harvested enough to feed their communities freed their neighbors to pursue other careers; the neighbors didn’t have to spend their days sowing and reaping to feed themselves. Instead, they became doctors, teachers, business

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owners—all the professions that diversify a healthy local economy.

“As local food sources become increasingly important in an energy-tight world, history may hold lessons for us,” Garrison says. “Abundant local food supplies can help sustain economic diversity and strength on the Central Coast.”

USDA Mobile Meat Harvester (MHU)

Central Coast Agriculture Cooperative’s new USDA Mobile Meat Harvester, a “revolutionary innovation in family ranching,” brings the harvesting process to you.

Citing the MHU brochure, “Ranches set up a staging area that includes a corral system and harvest box endorsed by Temple Grandin (author of *Animals Make us Human, Creating the Best Life for Animals*) for humane handling. In the Mobile Meat Harvester, livestock is presented to the inspector for ante-mortem inspection and, when deemed a healthy animal, is harvested and the carcass is raised into the unit to be skinned, trimmed and washed with an organic acid wash solution. The exterior doors of the unit are closed to prevent contamination, and the butcher and inspector are the only ones present during this process.

“Once the meat is inspected and found to be satisfactory, the carcass is tagged, stamped and moved into the refrigerated compartment where it remains until offloaded at the cut-and-wrap facility.”

Recently the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) filmed the Mobile Meat Harvesting team. *Out of the Past: A Journey Through the Landscapes of Livestock Production* is at this website: http://www.autonomyproductions.com/Out_of_the_past/index.htm.

CCAC Member Randy Rogers

Randy Rogers, Gold Ridge Farms and Farm Bureau member, recently e-mailed why he joined CCAC.

“The primary reason I joined was to utilize the mobile harvest unit. I currently have my lambs harvested at Creston Meat, and I feel that on-premise slaughtering reduces the stress factor. We raise organic grass-fed lambs on 15 irrigated acres and harvest about 30 lambs total for restaurant consumption. They are buying fresh, local, organic and quality.

“If I want to grow the operation and lease pasture land to meet demand, then the mobile harvest unit becomes critical.

“The secondary reason is that Gold Ridge Farms produces organic

produce for farmers markets, but we have the capacity to triple the production of kale, shallots, garlic, squash and leeks.

“Finally, the CCAC website will be a great vehicle for us to market our line of organic berry jams. The website will allow shoppers to link to our individual website and order product.”

CCAC Member George Kendall

George Kendall, a member of the Central Coast Ag Cooperative and also a Farm Bureau member, responded by e-mail.

“Thank you for asking about the CCAC. I am part of the cooperative because I think that local farmers and ranchers working together can open marketing opportunities in our communities that can be very difficult to open alone. This can be especially important for small operations such as ours.

“Collectively we produce a nice variety of high-quality food, and getting that food into local markets can only help appreciation of local agriculture. Being associated with like-minded producers is an added benefit.”



The Central Coast Agriculture Cooperative (CCAC) met recently at the San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau.