

Fairground Farms & Farmyard Festivals; Showcasing California Specialty Crops

Big Fresno Fair – October 4, 2012

A few notes from presentations compiled by Penny Leff, UC ANR Small Farm Program

Big Fresno Fair Education Program – John Alkire and Lauri King, Big Fresno Fair:

The agriculture building is an all-volunteer operation, with set-up starting in August for the October Fair event.

Education day, Thursday, is for K-8 students. The school district pays to bus thousands of children to the fair. Attending students get free tickets to come back to the fair with their families at another time, as an incentive for families to attend. The tours are teacher-led experiences, with 250 volunteers stationed in the exhibit buildings to explain the exhibits to students. The livestock barn is closed during Education Day for everyone's safety.

Food vendors are encouraged to offer healthy choice options, but no major contest or promo.

The contests offer premiums - \$30,000 in premium goes back into the community

The Big Fresno Fair runs the Fresno Food Expo in March with the Farm Bureau and others.

Fresno County Blossom Trail Art Exhibit – Kristi Johnson, Fresno county Office of Tourism

The Fresno County Blossom Trail runs on partnerships, one of which is with the Big Fresno Fair.

The Blossom Trail was started by the Office of Tourism in 1988. After 15 years, the event needed a little marketing, so a website was developed in 2004. A sister event, the Fresno County Fruit Trail, started in 2004.

Every year, tens of thousands of people visit the Blossom Trail, taking self-guided trails to see the fruit blossoms in February and March. Keeping up with modern marketing, visitors and the Office of Tourism will tweet the sighting of the first blossoms. The kick-off ceremony rotates between 5 rural towns, and is held on or around February 1st, before the blooms, to get everyone ready and to build awareness for the trail. Holding the event at a set time allows for planning, an improvement over the early years when everyone waited to actually see blossoms before they kicked off the Blossom Trail.

The Blossom Trail website invites visitors to send in photos of the blossoms, and these photos are displayed on the site. The Blossom Trail and the Fruit Trail each have websites and Twitter accounts: #gofruittrail, #goblossomtrail, www.gofruittrail.com, www.goblossomtrail.com

In partnership with the Big Fresno Fair, the Blossom Trail holds an art contest for poster art in October, and displays the art in the Fine Arts building at the October fair. The poster contest is popular – this year there were 25 submissions, which are all displayed. The winner's art becomes incorporated into a collectable Blossom Trail poster, with copies sold as a fundraiser for the event.

Thinking outside the box – Gary Schulz, California Raisin Marketing Board, former general manager of World Ag Expo in Tulare

The Raisin Marketing Board and the Ag Expo, and the fairs, are in the business of expanding the appreciation of agriculture into the community, but events need to be profitable.

The World Ag Expo started with tents, pipe and drape on farmland in the 70's, then moved to the Tulare County Fairgrounds. It was successful and grew. The Tulare Ag Show is now the largest farm equipment show in the world. The purpose of the show is to put the buyer and seller together. The economic impact of the show has been measured at \$1.2 billion.

The Ag Expo now includes farm tours in the program. The local convention and visitors' bureau people convinced Ag Expo organizers that this would be a good idea. The tours help spread economic benefit to the region and help showcase Tulare and Fresno County agriculture.

However, the World Ag Expo is only a few days a year. Schulz spent 15 years building the event and also developing a program to rent the facility for thousands of additional events each year. This is his philosophy for renting an event facility:

- Include everything in the price (Don't nickel and dime them)
- Take the long view (Build relationships)
- Smother the customer with customer service
- Get them to sign a renewal contract ASAP

Schulz's Customer Service pointers:

- Know who your customers are
- Front desk – very important first impression
- Voice mail – don't use it; you miss sales
- Good website
- Say please and thank you
- Use advisory committees
- Maintain regular communication with customers
- Survey your customers

Development of new events:

- Mine your current customers (exhibitors may be future event customers)
- Ask people to use your facilities
- Don't be afraid to "steal" ideas for events
- Create your own events

Why does the Raisin Board sponsor the Big Fresno Fair?

- The fair generates a good ROI, gets the product in front of target customers, Moms and seniors
- ROI is measured by number of snack packs handed out and by how many raisin growers show up.
- Goal: Exposure and interaction with the target market – young mom
- Goal: Exposure and interaction with our growers
- The exhibit is in the home arts building and includes cooking demos

Local wineries at the fair? – Debbie Milla, Milla Vineyards

In previous years, the Big Fresno Fair had a "Wine and Roses" pavilion where local wines were featured and poured. Recently, since the wine pavilion has been controlled by UNC Concessions and since SaveMart has come on as a sponsor of the wine garden, only Gallo wines are poured at the fair. The local vintners' group, Twin River Vintners, suggests bringing local wineries back into the pavilion. Milla suggests holding a regional wine contest to generate interest and to showcase wines of the Fresno region and those of surrounding counties.

Local growers and agritourism operators – Stacey Grote, Simonian Farms

Stacey Grote is operations manager for Simonian Farms, a local diversified farm and farm stand with entertaining and educational exhibits and programs. Grote wore a tee-shirt with "Team Simonian" on the front. She talked about Simonian's partnerships with the Convention and Visitors' Bureau, with the Farm Bureau, and with other local organizations, and about how she considered them members of "Team Simonian" because they worked together in marketing and promoting and explaining agriculture to tourists and visitors. Grote said when she was invited, as a local agritourism operator, to take part in the Fairs and Farms workshop today, she began wondering, "Why don't we work with the fair? The Big Fresno Fair isn't on my team." Her impression of the agriculture building at the fair is that it promotes

primarily the larger growers in the region, rather than smaller growers. Grote suggests including more fair involvement with local growers and agritourism operators.

Agri-tainment - Elisa Hays, The Cutest Show on Earth

Elisa Hays, who operates a grounds act, an interactive children's show for fairs and agritourism operations, talked about what makes her program work and offered suggestions for agricultural education for children. She showed examples of interactive, fun, whimsical activities with children, and reminded the group how important it is to keep the activities interactive and fun. She also consults with clients before each event and tailors each show to the local region and situation. The "Let's Pretend Farm Time Tour", and the world's first play-centric hand washing station, "Sudsy's Barn" are examples of her creative agricultural education offerings.

Engaging the community in agricultural support – Ryan Jacobsen, Fresno County Farm Bureau

Jacobsen described his agricultural education program as, "Trying to make urban people *care* where their food comes from." Since funding is tight and cut-backs are hitting many agricultural education programs, the fair is a major opportunity to educate kids. The Farm Bureau organizes an agricultural education day for children in March at the Big Fresno fairgrounds.

Jacobsen talked about the importance of engaging local media in educating about agricultural issues and in promoting agricultural events. The Farm Bureau puts a lot of effort toward getting the word out to influencers and decision makers such as politicians and news writers. He suggests trying to get your "brand" in front of them every 2 or 3 weeks. Jacobson encouraged the group to copy him on press releases and stories so he can help share this information to such influencers and decision makers.

Group Discussion notes compiled by Penny Leff, UC ANR Small Farm Program

Challenges facing fairs, specialty crop growers, agritourism operators and collaborative efforts

- Convention & Visitors Bureau can't get enough farmers up and ready to meet agritourism demand
- It's hard for tour organizers to know 6 months out when the blossoms will bloom, so they need other options from farmers to fill out the tours – other things for tourists to do on a "blossom" tour
- Tulare County Farm Bureau is challenged to meet the public demand for farm tours due to factors such as bio-security threats from visitors and the fact that it is a challenge for farmers to allow and welcome tours
- It is difficult to accommodate the general public on working farms for multiple reasons
 - Liability
 - Worry about animal rights activists
 - Need to protect farmers from liability and financial loss from visitor accidents, etc.
- Communication is a challenge
- Tours that cross county lines are a challenge, particularly for Farm Bureaus that are county-based
- Farmers should be compensated for hosting tours
- Farmers/ranchers don't always understand that people will pay for the experience of visiting
- The advancing age of many farmers is a challenge
- Farmers may not want visitors on their farms
- Ag education needs to be more than seeing and tasting – Information is in demand.
- It is a challenge to get local growers to participate in fairs.

- Some local wineries would like more opportunities to participate in fairs
- A September fair, at harvest time, is hard to participate in for farmers
- It is hard for an individual farm to staff a 13-day fair booth or pay exhibit fees
- The focus of fairs is on the entertainment; farmers and agriculture don't get attention
- The rich farmer/poor farm worker dichotomy – What does the fair offer to bring these two groups together when they may be looking to the fair for different purposes

Opportunities for fairs, specialty crop growers, agritourism operators and collaborative efforts

- A local wine pavilion
- A wine-makers' competition
- New activities such as a grape stomp
- Go back to the beginning by exhibiting agricultural history
 - Connect with a historical society
- Have a local farm exhibit (Ag building shows only big ag)
- Showcase local businesses, not just agriculture
- Community booth participation at the Big Fresno Fair
- Feature booth opportunities at other fairs
- Farm-fresh Thursday at the Alameda Fair allows producers to sell for one day and not have to staff the booth other days
- Selling produce to local school districts
- Farm Bureau sponsors lunch for livestock auction buyers at the fair
- Opportunity to inject local history into the fair
- Sponsors will pay for access to the demographic of agritourism visitors
- Seniors are big in agritourism interest
- Convention and Visitors Bureaus can be great partners in sending visitors to farm activities and tours
- www.calagtour.org has free directory listings and calendar for agritourism operators – used by visitors looking for farms and ranches to visit.

Next steps for fairs, specialty crop growers, agritourism operators and collaborative efforts

- Involve food supply chain members beyond farmers and ranchers and farm workers
- Meet the challenge- show why agricultural education is important
- Set up a feature booth at the Merced County Fair
- Set up walking tours at MOA
- Set up Farm Fresh Thursdays at other fairs
- Hold farmers' markets at fairs to sell produce
- Bake pies and cakes & other goods at the home arts building and sell slices
- Networking among farmers to build tourism – collaborate to share time and expense of participating in a fair
- Share networking information
- Join the Farm Bureau to get information out
- Alameda County Fair will help, if asked, with setting up a regional wine competition