

Notes from the Northern Valley and Mountains Agritourism Gathering June 2, 2011 at Chaffin Family Orchards near Oroville, CA

Notes compiled Penny Leff

About 15 adults and one child gathered at Chaffin Family Orchards on one of the few clear days the first week of June to talk about agritourism and to tour Chaffin Orchards with host Chris Kerston. We first drove to the meeting site – haybales set up in a circle around a fire, next to an orchard. Most of the participants were neighbors from Butte County, but our group also included a few from further away.

Since we were already a small group, we stayed in one group for discussion, starting with introductions and updates from those attending:

Notes from group discussion:

Steve Mueller from **Karen Muellers Christmas Farm** talked about their Christmas tree farm nearby. It is a cut-your-own operation, with no herbicides or pesticides used, and no additional irrigation beyond rainwater. They offer tours with no charge. Steve will dress as Santa for the children, and also visit day care centers, nursing homes and schools as Santa. (There was more, but I missed it, sorry)

Chris Kerston talked about **Chaffin Family Orchards**.

- About 2000 acres, including 100 year old olive trees used for both oil pressing and table olives, picked by contracted crews, and 50 year old heirloom stone fruit trees that get hand-picked.
- Grass-fed beef cattle
- Sheep, goats and chickens integrated into the orchard operations, housed in portable enclosures, fenced with movable electric fences powered by solar powered portable generators.
- Entire operation run by 7 people
- Sell at 8 farmers' markets
- Growing agritourism operation – Chris is out speaking a lot, and many people want to visit. They started with free tours, but now charge for tours, preferring to do larger group tours and bigger events. Recent agritourism activities include 1000 visitors on Sierra Oro Farm Trails day, 45 3rd graders camping for 3 days, the Wheeled Migration bicycle tour, and the Chico region Foodshed Tour. Chris prefers to host groups that are interested in the sustainable agriculture lessons or regional wildlife, rather than those who are looking for a petting zoo or a purely recreational experience.
- Outreach includes listings on Farmstayus.com and calagtour.org, and involvement in the local Weston Price Chapter.

Michelle and Ernst Chew talked about their **Painted Sky Ranch** goat operation near Gridley. They currently have about 30 goats on shared land, and are looking for a permanent location where they can expand. They currently make and sell goat milk soap and lotion, and care for goats and milk for several goat milk shares (arranged through the Weston Price organization), dropping off milk for these shareholders. They would like to open a creamery. Challenges include Health Department regulations and cost. They would need to get a USDA Grade A Dairy license. It costs the same to set up a goat dairy as it does a cow dairy, but cows produce more milk. They know there is demand for both goat milk and for goat meat. They have been offered places in farmers' markets, but are not yet able to sell meat or milk.

Steve Williams talked about his **Max's Miracle Ranch**, in Biggs, which is more agritourism-oriented. He started a non-profit organization in honor of his son to assist families of children with heart defects, and

the ranch activities support this organization. The 40-odd acres were planted in peaches. Now it offers U-Pick tree fruit and berries, a train, a petting zoo, a harvest festival with pumpkin patch, corn maze and carnival rides, a Hawaiian Luau with dancers, a roast and kid's activities. Steve would like to bring in more educational activities. He promotes on local TV, radio and through word of mouth, on localharvest.org, calagtour.org and his own website.

Jeanne Rawlings, of **Dustlight Productions**, is a film-maker who would like to meet small-scale farmers in Northern California for a documentary movie. She is interested in what is happening with water rights, and will be working with Karen Sinell on her book about agritourism farms.

Karen Sinell is an **author and photographer**. She would like to create a book about agritourism of Northern California. She is looking for farmers to include in the book, with stories and history of the farms.

John and Glenda Morse talked about their **Morse Farms**, which is 5 acres of Mandarins, and now other fruit to extend the season. The Morse's sell from their shed, offer hot chocolate and more to visitors, give tours of the orchard, and create and sell several value-added products. They make a BBQ rub and a mandarin ice cream syrup, using a rented commercial kitchen, which they sell on-line, at their stand and in local stores. Their fruit stand is only open during mandarin harvest season, in the winter. Morse Farms participates in Sierra Oro Farm Tour day, even though the mandarins are not ripe at the time. They create a map of the orchard and offer tours for the Sierra Oro Farm Tour event, and sell their other products.

Lisa Humphries, of the **Glenn County Farm Bureau**, said that she was attending the event to be able to share what she learned today with other Farm Bureau members. Lisa reported that the Glenn County FB is involved in new farmers' markets in Willows and Orland.

Kari Todd, of the **Tehama County Farm Bureau**, shared information about the new Farm Bureau-sponsored Tehama County Farm Trails Map. The Farm Bureau is organizing the first Tehama County Farm Trails Passport Weekend June 18 and 19 this year. The passport event includes olive oil producers, farm stands and wineries. It is modeled after the Sierra Oro Farm Trails tour event. Farms and other businesses on the tour map pay \$150 each in cash or product. The group put together baskets of products to sell as a fundraiser, but is rethinking that idea. They have a website and a Facebook page. Several people in the discussion today recommended a targeted Facebook ad as a low-cost promotion that works well.

Chris Dallas, of the **Sierra Nevada Conservancy** (a co-sponsor for this project) gave a brief explanation of the Conservancy. It is a state agency, concerned with the environmental, social and economic health of the Sierra Nevada region. One of the Conservancy's recent projects is development of a Geotourism website in cooperation with National Geographic.

Anne Benoit, of **Mountain View Christmas Tree Farm**, talked about her business. The farm is a Sierra Oro Farm Trails member. In addition to selling Christmas trees, they have animals to view and offer hotdogs and marshmallows for visitors to roast. Anne explained that theirs is a weather-dependant business, subject to lost sales during winter storms or rain. The Mountain View farm will host the California Christmas Tree Association meeting this fall, and is a co-chair of the National Christmas Tree Association.

Risk Management Presentation

John Dahlmeier of **Dahlmeier Insurance** talked to the group about the importance of risk management planning. These are some of the highlights of his presentation:

- The foothills regions have many small acreage property-owners, with perhaps 5-10 acres, moving into farming with only a homeowner's policy. Many of these small-scale growers may need more liability insurance, particularly if they invite visitors to their land.
- Everyone is unique and each business has unique exposures. As production and marketing patterns change, so risk management needs to change. For example, olives in the region used to be picked and sold to the processing plant. Now the olive growers are more likely to do their own processing of olive oil and maintain ownership of the oil – thus taking on more liability. Other unique exposures would include goat milk shares, train rides and most innovative agritourism activities. It is important to show your insurance agent your activities and plans.
- Inviting the public onto your property needs risk management. John suggests these strategies:
 - Contracts with sub-contractors and visiting groups
 - Having visiting groups provide Certificate of Insurance or list you as Additional Insured. Note: A certificate of insurance merely states that the visitor group has insurance, while the listing as "additional insured" means that the insurance company of the visiting group agrees to provide your defense if there is a claim.
 - Have a plan about how to handle such problems as drunk visitors
 - Increase your deductibles to keep your cost down, because you probably won't want to file claims for smaller incidents anyway.
 - Consider whether you need to insure it, or is it needed for your operation (Such as an older building)
 - Don't use ladders for a U-Pick operation
 - Have visitors sign waivers, stating their understanding of the risks
- In answer to a question about the effectiveness of a contract, and whether the sub-contractor would have liability, John answered that it all helps mitigate losses, and makes the insurance company for the sub-contractor get into the discussion, but that in the long run, everyone can get sued.
- An independent insurance agent is better able to shop with different insurance companies for the best coverage for unique exposures than an agent who only works for one company.
- An insurance agent with AFIS certification is better able to understand agricultural issues.

Networking – We took some time for individual conversations.

Chaffin Orchards Tour

Chris Kerston led the group on an extensive tour of the Chaffin Family Orchards, similar to the tour that he gives to most visiting groups – a 2-hour tour! We visited the 400-odd chickens in their mobile electric fence enclosure in the orchards, learned about the chicken tractor, saw the solar-powered generator, the chicken-water system, discussed predator danger and learned how chickens contribute to the integrated system and that chickens are not vegetarians – they love bugs. Then we spent some time with the goat herd in the olive orchard, learning how they are used to control weeds and suckers and how dedicated dog-guardians live with the herd as protectors and herders, and why intense herd short-term grazing is more sustainable and effective than leaving animals spread permanently over a wider range area. We next drove up through a quarry on the table mountain and to the top of Table Mountain to look down over the entire 2000 acre farm, to see the man-made pond that is the water source, and to see the water pipe that provides gravity-feed irrigation for the orchards from the pond. And lots more.