



Volume 8, Number 10, October 8, 2020

by Larry A. Quinn

WILDFIRES PLUS COVID ARE COMPLICATING CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE – Fire is a regular occurrence in California every summer.

“For anyone outside of the state, you only hear about an incident when it destroys a lot of structures, burns iconic tourist sites, or gets so large that it pulls massive amounts of resources. All of those have happened this fire season multiple times over and continue,” **Taylor Hillman** (AgNet West, Clovis, California) said.

Three major fires developed nearly simultaneously in mid-August. All three were caused by small lightning fires that burned together and multiplied in size overnight with Santa Ana winds. Labelled “Lightning Complex Fires,” these incidents blanketed California from Bakersfield to Humboldt with smoke and ash.



“The usual suspects for agriculture were immediately impacted,” Hillman added. “Livestock operations scrambled to evacuate to local fairgrounds and high schools. Feed became scarce, and communities pulled together with donations. It is sad to say, but those individuals affected are kind of used to it, and it seemed semi-normal at the beginning.

“What wasn’t normal was what ensued around agriculture shortly after. With COVID-19 recommendations for worker safety, N-95 masks for workers were scarce already. The magnitude of the three big fires at the time [triggered new smoke exposure protections for workers](#). Operations now had to have N-95 masks for any worker outside, whether they were six feet away from each other or not. Local farm bureaus and associations organized free mask giveaways when and where they could. Some operations slowed to a crawl, and harvests were delayed.

“Fires continue to pop up around the state; and, because resources are so limited, many small fires are left until they threaten property and life or get to a certain size. Those three fires in August alone totaled around 800,000 acres burned, destroying around 2,000 acres and killing 21 people. A new fire has developed that, according to reports, has already burned through a few wineries in Napa County and many acres of vines.

“But again, fires are fairly normal for the agriculture community in California. The industry is resilient, weathers the storm, and finds a way to keep going. The smoke and ash in many of the growing areas subsided and -- even with new fires -- have not gotten as bad as they were in late August. Harvests again picked back up, and livestock producers are assessing the damage; however, the most impactful problem from the fires is speculative.

“After the Tubbs Fire ripped through the North Coast Wine Region of California in 2017, a few wineries refused to buy contracted grapes from growers claiming what they called “smoke taint.” It has been a snowball effect since then with more occurrences and associations securing funding to look into the science of the issue. Basically, users test for a volatile compound, and if there are amounts of it in the grape, more and more wineries are voiding the contract. There is little known about the impacts of this compound as some varieties produce them naturally, and there are no thresholds for testing. Due to the fire activity this year, many buyers are only accepting crops that go through the testing process. However, there are only a few facilities that can test for the compound, and growers are reporting a 30-day or more waiting period.”

“If the delay is a 30-day delay, then effectively that winery is saying ‘we’re not going to take your crop.’ So that’s a problem,” [said California Association of Winegrape Growers President John Aguirre](#). “Delays at this point in time in the harvest cycle and the growing season can be absolutely devastating to a grower.”

There has been an oversupply problem for some variety of wine grapes for a few years. Allied Grape Growers called for 30,000 acres of grapes to be removed from California production at last year's Unified Wine and Grape Symposium. COVID-19 then shut down the restaurant industry, which significantly impacted wine sales. With an oversupply of grapes and unmoved product from the pandemic, many buyers are not excited to take on more fruit that could be flawed by smoke.

"I'd call it a 'get out of jail free' card in some cases where they're using potential smoke exposure as an excuse to not bring the grapes in or to delay harvest for evaluation," [said Allied Grape Grower President Jeff Bitter](#). "Some buyers were not in a position to want to accept the entire production from this year's crop because of their own oversupply situations due to COVID and the shutdowns."



VANDERWERT WINS SHOWMANSHIP AWARD –

Anita Vanderwert (Brownfield Ag News, Jefferson City, Missouri) got back in the show ring for the first time in 30 years and won the “aged” class for cattle showmanship at this year’s Missouri State Fair, after accepting a challenge from her son, **Ethan**.

After competing in and winning the “Old Timers Showmanship Contest” this summer, Vanderwert commented, “Yep, Dad, I still remember your lessons taught.”

“Twenty-five years zips by when you are keeping yourself entertained, challenged, and motivated to learn,” she said. “I had never thought about staying at one place for five years, and now I am celebrating 25 years at Brownfield Ag News. Many of my previous employers are no doubt surprised, as well.”

Vanderwert grew up on a livestock operation in Missouri. She spent a lot of her childhood traveling with her dad, showing cattle and attending various 4-H, FFA, and Charolais events. These events took her to 38 states, Canada, and Europe before she attended the University of Missouri-Columbia after high school.

Vanderwert liked to explore her options, so after graduating with a degree in ag journalism, she went to work for the American-International Charolais Association as their communications director. This started her career path that had her spending a couple years there, followed by Rhea & Kaiser, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, and Osborn Barr before she joined Brownfield.

“I love the people I work with and the clients I work for,” says Vanderwert. “Clients keep us challenged, and co-workers keep us entertained. It’s perfect.”

Vanderwert is a Management Sales Council member of NAFB.



MACKLEY JOINS KANSAS FARM AND RANCH RADIO NETWORK – Madison Mackley recently joined the team at Rocking M Media as the farm director for the Kansas Farm and Ranch Radio Network (Colby, Kansas). This is her first job in broadcasting, working simultaneously as a farm broadcaster and still farming alongside her family.

Mackley grew up in the small northwest Kansas town of Winona and currently resides in Oakley, Kansas. She earned her BS in agronomy from Kansas State University in May 2018. After graduation, Mackley was the Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agent in Thomas County, Kansas, until September 2019, when she returned home to farm full-time with her family. In June 2020, former Farm Director **Sara Miles** reached out to her about the job opening, and Mackley joined the team in July 2020.

“Since joining this team, I’ve received nothing but support from all co-workers and the community. Everyone is understanding that I have no broadcasting background, and they are willing to work with me as well as work around my farming schedule. We’re gearing up for fall harvest now, so I’ll be spending most of my time

creating my farm reports from the cab of my combine. I think it will add a neat perspective to the position and will allow me to be creative with what I’m reporting. I feel honored that they reached out to me for this position and are allowing me to have the flexibility to make it my own. It’s also kind of cool to be a voice on the radio station I grew up listening to. My dad still plays AM790 all the time, and it’s where I began to love all the classic country songs. Even in college, when I was making Spotify study playlists, classic country always seemed to be a top hit — especially Dolly.”

As the Mackley family gears up for harvest, they're also pregnant-checking heifers and cows preparing for the upcoming calving season. As a family, they raise corn, wheat, milo, and feed as well as run an Angus cow-calf operation. There isn't much time for an "off-season" for Mackley and her family, but it's always a good time on the farm with her family. Calving season is one of her favorites, despite it being cold out.



When not at the station, you can find Mackley on the farm, playing with her two dogs, **Maggie** and **Kelso**, or hanging out with her niece and nephews. She is an avid Kansas State Wildcats fan and a big Green Bay Packers fan, so you can almost guarantee football is on the radio every weekend in the combine cab.

TEXAS FARM BUREAU LAUNCHES PODCAST – Texas Farm Bureau (Waco, Texas), the state's largest general farm organization, launched a daily weekday podcast that highlights important news and happenings in Texas agriculture. *Texas Ag Today* is a product of the Texas Farm Bureau Radio Network. The podcast is hosted by Texas Farm Bureau Radio Network Manager **Carey Martin**.



Pictured from left to right are Texas Farm Bureau Radio Network broadcasters **Tom Nicolette**, **Jessica Domel**, and **Carey Martin**.

The *Texas Ag Today* podcast will feature reports from the Texas Farm Bureau Radio Network staff and from several correspondents throughout the state of Texas.

“We’re excited about offering this daily podcast to Texas farmers and ranchers and to everyone who has an interest in Texas agriculture,” Martin said. “We have three full-time farm broadcasters at the network plus reporters from around the state who work to bring listeners the latest on farm and ranch news. I believe we have one of the largest agricultural news teams in the state.

“The [Texas Farm Bureau Radio Network](#) is the state’s number-one and most-listened-to agricultural radio network. The network features more than 90 affiliate stations and rates highest for Texas farmer and rancher all-day listening. *Texas Ag Today* is a daily weekday podcast from the Texas Farm Bureau Radio Network that highlights important news and happenings in Texas agriculture.”

Listeners can subscribe to *Texas Ag Today* on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), [Stitcher](#), and [TuneIn](#).

HURRICANE LAURA DAMAGES LOUISIANA AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY – Hurricane Laura caused just over \$525 million in damage to Louisiana farmers and \$1.1 billion in damage to the Louisiana timber industry, according to preliminary estimates by the Louisiana State University AgCenter.

Don Molino (Voice of Louisiana Agriculture Radio Network, Baton Rouge, Louisiana) reports that Laura devastated 757,538 acres of timber from the southwest to northeast parts of the state. In comparison, agricultural losses — including forestry, crops, and fisheries — from Hurricane Katrina, along with Hurricane Rita in 2005, totaled \$1.5 billion.

Calcasieu Parish in far southwest Louisiana had the highest forestry acreage damage total of 188,292 acres, but the lost timber value was guesstimated at \$76.7 million.





Most of the agricultural losses involved infrastructure damage. Reduced production resulted in \$48.4 million in losses, stored commodity losses at \$6.9 million, livestock losses at \$1.4 million, increased crop production costs of \$6.7 million, and infrastructure damage of \$462 million.

Molino added most of the damage came from winds of 150 miles an hour and not flooding.



CUNNINGHAMS MARK 50th ANNIVERSARY – In July, NAFB President-Elect **Gale Cunningham** and his wife, **Beth**, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

Cunningham met his future wife while in junior high school during Vacation Bible School at their church. Little did either one of them realize that in 11 years they would be married. They were married at Hopwood Chapel in the East Tennessee Hills, where they recently went back and revisited for their 50th celebration trip. They also visited their first apartment in Knoxville, Tennessee, and spent the remaining week of their anniversary at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina.

The Cunninghams raised three children: **Tonya, Tyson, and Tara**. They lost their son, Tyson, 14 years ago. They are “Grammy” and “Granddad” to five grandchildren.

Cunningham readily admits that his wife of 50 years deserves a medal. His career started and remained in banking and led him back to his passion for farming. Gale worked at several banks in his career and ended up in Watseka, Illinois, where he was farming. He retired from both 12 years ago.

“It takes a strong, patient, praying, and understanding wife to survive 50 years with a farm boy who had the farm work ethic times 10. I owe Beth for making the step into farm broadcasting. After the death of our son and retiring from farming and banking, she told me that my passion remains to ‘tell the story of agriculture, the rewards and the struggles.’”

Since his first time on-air at WITY (Danville, Illinois) to his full time daily work at WYXY Classic 99.1 FM (Champaign, Illinois), and from his childhood sweetheart to his wife of 50 years, Cunningham gives all the credit to a loving wife, God, and his two daughters.

WE WANT YOUR NEWS — Send us your stories and photos for future newsletter issues. Contact Larry Quinn at larryquinn@outlook.com or phone at **703-819-6532**. *Airing on the Side of Agriculture* is included in the blog section of NAFB.com. For an archive copy of any past issues, go to **Membership** and click on ***Airing on the Side of Agriculture***.

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