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UC ANR Field Days: Connecting Farmers with Emerging Technologies

(Clockwise from top) A robotic lettuce harvester by SAMI Robotics and other Ag Tech is shown at a recent Leafy Greens Field Day in San Benito County. Hannah Johnson is director of the UC ANR Connect Program that hosts Field Days for companies to showcase their innovative solutions to issues facing California growers.

by Hilary Rance and photography by James Collier for CA GROWN

What if there were a way for farmers to communicate their most pressing problems – and an agency that could help facilitate solutions? Here in California, there is. University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR)'s Connect Program hosts Field Days that connect farmers with companies developing solutions to some of their biggest concerns.

What is UC ANR Connect?

Hannah Johnson, director of the Connect Program at UC ANR, created the program with one simple purpose – giving farmers the tools they need to survive and thrive. Her motivations are both altruistic and personal. Hannah's family sold their alfalfa farm in 2017 – a difficult decision made after years of economic instability. Hannah hopes the Connect Program can help other farmers avoid a similar fate.

"The goal is to make sure there are not other farmers in the same spot, and to make sure they are connected to the tools, the expertise, the researchers, the investors, the state agencies, and the funding mechanisms that they need to keep going, because we cannot lose any more farms in California." Hannah said. "The UC ANR Connect Program is the only program that is vetting technology for California growers."

The Connect Program focuses on solving growers' biggest problems. So, naturally, the first step is figuring out what those problems are.

"We ask growers up and down the state what are their biggest pain points," Hanna explained. "We then go scout and vet tech that is solving those pain points."

There are countless companies developing technology that could potentially benefit California growers, but only the most promising make it into the Connect Program and onto the Field Day lineup. Business models, teams and even pitches are meticulously reviewed and analyzed before a company gets the green light. "We put these companies through the wringer," Hannah admitted with a grin.

What are Field Days?

The Connect Program's Field Days showcase innovative solutions to some of the issues facing California growers. During these commodity or region specific events, companies are invited to showcase their products and demonstrate them in real-world conditions. Farmers, students and policymakers are invited to view and evaluate these emerging technologies. During a recent leafy greens Field Day, for example, SAMI Robotics debuted their robotic lettuce harvester, an innovative solution to labor shortages that plague farmers across the state.

Field Days are beneficial to both growers and emerging technology companies – and not just in terms of facilitating future sales. Growers can give real-time feedback on the products, highlighting potential issues and suggesting ways to improve efficiency. Technology companies then use this information to make any needed changes or adjustments, ultimately providing growers with a product that best meets their needs.

For the Connect Team, Field Days are also an opportunity to learn which companies are truly passionate about the work – who is willing to go above and beyond.

"There is so much you can see about a company in how they show up and behave at Field Day," Hannah noted. "I want to watch this company show up early, to see how they talk to researchers. I want them to be talking to the farm owner and I want to see them stay late. We clock all of that, and I think farmers do, too."

Field Days: Planning and participation

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See Field Days page 13

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30 Webinars in November highlight steps to transition livestock operations to organic. Spanish interpretation available for free series organized by CAFF and UC. A free lunchtime webinar series featuring experienced organic livestock producers, certifiers and University of California scientists will guide farmers and ranchers seeking to transition their cattle, poultry and other livestock.

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California
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New Water Year Calls for Flexibility, Preparedness

by ACWA Staff

As California begins a new water year, the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA) is calling on state leaders to embrace long-term planning around water management as recommended through its Vision for Our Water Future initiative.

Beginning today and lasting through Sept. 30, 2027, the new water year is expected to include an unusually strong El Niño event. Gov. Gavin Newsom recently proclaimed a state of emergency to accelerate preventative flood control work, with forecasts predicting a greater than 90 percent chance of a historically severe event during fall and winter 2026-'27.

However, by providing greater operational flexibility and increasing system capacity, California can also capture and store water from this type of weather event, reduce flood risks, better protect communities, and prepare for a future of increasingly extreme and unpredictable weather and hydrology.

"The start of a new water year is an important reminder that California cannot control when and how water enters the system, but we can improve our ability to manage it when it does," said ACWA Executive Director Karla Nemeth. "That means increasing our ability to capture, move and store water. Whether this winter brings extreme storms or conditions change quickly, California needs a water system designed to manage increasingly extreme and variable conditions."

Nemeth, who became ACWA executive director Sept. 1, previously served as director of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) beginning in 2018. Her work at DWR included preparing for more extreme weather, investing in atmospheric and runoff forecasting and infrastructure, advancing groundwater management and supporting local water resilience.

A Water System Designed for Extremes

ACWA's Vision for Our Water Future provides a workable framework for the challenges ahead. Developed with ACWA's broad and diverse membership of 470 public water agencies statewide, who supply water to 90% of Californians, the initiative calls for a resilient and reliable water system capable of meeting the needs of the state's economy, communities and environment. ACWA launched its Vision initiative to elevate water as a priority for California's next governor, legislative leaders and state officials.

"California has the expertise and experience to adapt to a changing hydrology," Nemeth said. "Now we need sustained action to modernize our water system, increase its capacity and build the flexibility needed to manage both wet and dry extremes."

Preparing California for a more variable and unpredictable water future requires both increased capacity and greater flexibility. Increasing capacity means strengthening the state's ability to capture and store water, including through surface and groundwater storage, while improving the infrastructure needed to capture and move water when available and where it can provide the greatest benefit. Providing flexibility means using better forecasting, real-time information and adaptive operations so water managers can respond to rapidly changing conditions while meeting water supply and environmental priorities.

Recent experience demonstrates what greater flexibility can accomplish. During storms in December 2025, changes that allowed for more real-time operational decision-making enabled the State Water Project to capture an additional 15,000 acre-feet of water in December and January, enough to supply 30,000 Californians with water for an entire year.

Increasing Capacity for the Long Term

The need to increase water-system capacity extends well beyond a single winter. Earlier this year, California launched development of the California Water Plan 2028 with a statewide planning target of 9 million acre-feet by 2040, encompassing supply, conservation, recharge and storage strategies intended to help close projected future supply gaps.

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What Harvest Can Teach You About Next Season's Weed Strategy

Lightning Weeder is a commercial tractor-mounted electric weed control unit that is currently being used in the U.S. to target tall weeds without the use of herbicides

Late-season weed escapes can reveal where current programs need reinforcement—and help growers decide which tools belong in next season's plan

Harvest is usually measured by what comes out of the field. But it can be just as useful to look at what is left behind.

Weeds still standing late in the season can tell growers where their weed-management program may need additional support. Which weeds escaped? Where was the pressure greatest? Did they survive earlier treatments? And could those surviving plants contribute seed to future weed pressure?

These are useful questions to ask while the evidence is still visible.

Herbicide resistance has made that evaluation increasingly important. As some weeds become more difficult to manage with the same chemistry, growers are looking at integrated strategies that combine chemical, mechanical and other methods rather than relying on a single approach.

Electric weed control is one of those tools.

The LASCO Lightning Weeder™ uses a patented Electric Discharge System (EDS) to make direct contact with weeds and deliver electrical energy through the plant, rapidly heating cellular fluids and damaging plant tissue. Because the process does not depend on a chemical active ingredient, it provides another option for targeting weeds that survive earlier control efforts.

The technology has a practical role when weeds extend above the crop canopy, where they can be contacted by the equipment. Rather than replacing existing herbicide or cultivation programs, electric weed control can help address a gap within a broader weed-management strategy.

The 2026 growing season provided LASCO with considerably more commercial field experience. According to LASCO Founder and CEO Kevin Olson, several thousand acres were treated with Lightning Weeders through rental machines and custom applicators, targeting waterhemp and other herbicide-resistant weeds. One grower told Olson that after treating his fields with the Lightning Weeder, waterhemp was no longer a problem.

The season also demonstrated the importance of planning equipment needs early. Olson said demand for rental machines and custom applicators was high enough that some acres could not be treated.

For growers considering electric weed control, however, adding the technology does not necessarily mean purchasing equipment immediately. Rental programs and custom application provide ways to evaluate how the technology performs under actual field conditions before making a larger investment.

For California growers, that evaluation should begin with the individual operation. Cropping systems, weed pressure, acreage, timing and field conditions all influence whether a technology makes sense and where it could complement existing practices.

Harvest provides a good opportunity to make that assessment. Before the next crop goes into the ground, identify the weeds that escaped, note where problems occurred and consider whether another approach could strengthen next season's program.

As Olson puts it, "The time to think about next year's resistant weeds is while you can still see what happened this year."

The weeds left standing at harvest are not simply the end of this season's story. They can provide some of the most useful information for deciding what to do differently next season.

To learn more about the LASCO Lightning Weeder™, visit www.lightningweeder.com. To schedule a field demonstration, rental or discuss the right solution for your operation, email lasco@arvig.org

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Source

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https://ucanr.edu/blog/uc-weed-science-weed-control-management-ecology-and-minutia/article/first-impressions-uc-davis

Tracking the Path of New World Screwworm

ARS is employing innovative modeling techniques to predict where New World screwworm infestations may emerge in the U.S.

By: Todd Silver

New cases of New World screwworm have recently surfaced in the United States, and with them the critical need to track its paths to determine where future infestations may occur. Researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Service (ARS) are employing predictive models as part of a forward-thinking approach to manage New World screwworm. This strategy allows USDA agencies to act earlier, respond faster, and direct resources where they are needed the most to protect U.S. livestock, pets, and wildlife.

"Everything in modern agriculture and pest management is moving toward precision intervention and that includes the Sterile Insect Technique (SIT) for control of New World Screwworm. Modeling their movement and using this information for optimal placement maximizes our impact and hastens eradication" said Dr. Scott Hutchins, Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics at USDA.

Predictive models use advanced analytic tools and artificial intelligence (AI) to interpret ecological, environmental, and historical information to predict where New World screwworm is likely to become established and the potential pathways it may follow to spread. The models look at the following factors:

Ecological and habitat suitability to identify landscapes and habitats that naturally support New World screwworm and map the regions in which this pest could move through favorable environments.

Environmental conditionsto monitor key factors such as temperature and precipitation, because they can directly influence New World screwworm survival, reproduction, and spread. Changes in the weather, such as seasonal changes, can raise or lower the risk of New World screwworm infestations.

Historical outbreaks and patterns to anticipate where New World screwworm may move next. The models also review past management efforts, highlighting actions that effectively slowed this pest and those that were not successful. This information will aid in the development of new mitigation strategies.

"We now have at our disposal incredible tools to help re-eradicate New World screwworm that were not available to our predecessors, including advanced AI and predictive modeling tools that can be employed to help us forecast where New World screwworm infestations are likely to pop up," said Kim Lohmeyer, Director of the ARS Knipling-Bushland Live-

See World Screwworm page 15

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SCAN ME

Field Days

continued from page 4

which the Ag Tech Alliance breaks into nine distinct growing regions, each with its own set of challenges. When planning future Field Days, the Connect team starts by "choosing a geography." From there, they chat with growers in the region to determine their most pressing issues. Those conversations help shape an application that goes out to companies developing technology that could address those specific challenges.

The Connect Program carefully reviews the applications before selecting 10 to 20 companies to pitch their technology. From that group, the highest-ranking and most established companies are invited to join the Connect Program and, ultimately, participate in a Field Day.

The California Ag Tech Alliance

Field Days and UC ANR's Connect Program fall under the umbrella of the California Ag Tech Alliance. While the Connect Program focuses on tackling some of the biggest challenges facing California growers, the Ag Tech Alliance takes a broader approach. The alliance brings together universities, growers and industry partners to support workforce development, build a statewide network and create an investment hub designed to speed up the development and adoption of new technologies for California agriculture.

In just two years, the Ag Tech Alliance has already made a big impact. The organization has awarded more than $2 million in funding, partnered with more than 100 startups and trained 800 people for high-tech careers in agriculture – from drones and robotics to precision farming.

Supporting California Farmers

UC ANR's Connect Program works tirelessly to support California farmers – and Hannah encourages consumers to do the same.

"California agriculture grows the best there is," Hannah asserted. "Farmers care deeply about the land; they care deeply about their workers, and it's hard to grow anything – anywhere. You've got to love it to keep doing it. It's sacred work – and if you can choose to purchase California Grown, you should."

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High Labor Costs Plague California Sheep and Goat Producers

By Julie Finzel, Livestock and Range Advisor,
UC Cooperative Extension, Kern, Tulare, and Kings Counties

Most agricultural employers are familiar with Assembly Bill 1066 (2016), often called the Ag Overtime Law, and the impact it has on farm labor across California. What may be less understood, however, is the impact of AB 1066 on the sheep and goat industry in California. Unlike cattle, sheep and goats generally require a herder to be on-site 24/7. These herders are called range herders because they live and work with livestock on rangelands. More than 90% of range herders in California are immigrants who hold H-2A visas (Doran et al, California Agriculture, 2026).

Under the H-2A program for range herders, the federal Department of Labor sets a minimum monthly wage, and employers are also required to provide housing, food, and a cell phone for herders. In 2002, California increased the minimum wage for range herders above the federal minimum and has maintained a higher minimum wage for range herders since. With the passing of AB 1066, overtime was phased in for all agricultural workers, including range herders. Since range herders live at their place of work, they are considered on duty 24/7; if standard overtime rates were applied to range herders their salary would be about $20,000 per month. However, the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) established an alternative monthly wage for sheep range herders with increases phased in over a period of four years. In 2025, the required minimum monthly wage was $2,934 in regular wages with $1,887 in overtime wages, for a total monthly salary of $4,820. For comparison, a California worker who earns the minimum wage of $16.50 for a 40-hour week earns $2,857.80. In addition, sheep producers employing range herders continue to be required to provide housing, food, and a cell phone to all range herders.

While range herders live and work with the livestock and are required to be on-call 24/7, most range herders report working seven to eight hours per day. It is important to note that some parts of the year or management duties require longer workdays, such as lambing season.

AB 1066 increased range herder wages by 250%, putting significant financial pressure on sheep producers in California. Sheep and goat producers responded by assigning more sheep per range herder, expanding their flocks, switching to hourly wages where possible, exiting the business, and/or providing targeted grazing services as an alternative income source.

The significant increase in range herder wages put additional pressure on a sheep industry that has been shrinking steadily for decades as a result of low prices for lamb and wool and rising competition from overseas imports. In California, revenues from the sheep and goat industry account for less than 1% of the $60 billion on farm sales, making sheep and goat producers small fish swimming in a big sea.

In comparison to their relatively small size in California agriculture, sheep and goat producers have an oversized impact. The use of sheep and goats in targeted grazing and integrated crop-livestock systems (ICLS) is a growing industry. Grazing livestock can remove fire fuel and recycle it into soil-building nutrients that improve ecosystem function while also reducing fuel loads on the landscape. When sheep and goat grazing is incorporated into crop management, they can reduce the need for mowing and herbicides and improve nutrient cycling in the soil, building soil health for more resilient cropping systems. While cattle can also provide important ecosystem benefits, they are larger than sheep and goats and not as easily transported between locations. In contrast, the sheep and goat industries are historically nomadic, making them well-suited to meet this growing demand.

While California DIR established an alternative minimum wage for sheep herders, the regulatory language was specific to sheep herders. Previously, the term sheep herders had always been understood to apply to sheep and goat range herders due to the similarities in their job duties. However, DIR interpreted the language as written and was prepared to require the minimum monthly wage of almost $20,000 for goat herders. However, the legislature stepped in and passed Senate Bill 143 which held goat herder wages the same as sheep herder wages until July 1, 2026.

SB 143 also required a study of the alternative monthly wage for both sheep and goat range herders. Knowing that SB 143 would sunset at the beginning of July 2026, the sheep and goat industry worked tirelessly to find a solution; however, the legislation sunset before a suitable resolution could be reached. Recently, the legislature passed AB 127 which is a budget trailer bill that holds goat herder wages equal with sheep herder wages until January 1, 2029. AB 127 is not retroactive. While goat producers (the majority of whom provide much-needed targeted grazing services across California) are grateful for the action taken by the legislature and the governor, AB 127 is a short-term fix and long-term resolution of the issue is still needed.

Doran, Morgan P., Julie A. Finzel, Alexandra E. Hill, Ruben Lugo, Daniel K. Macon, and Philip L. Martin. 2026. "California Sheep and Goat Ranchers Adjust to Wage Increases." California Agriculture: The Journal of UC Agriculture and Natural Resources 80 (May). https://doi.org/10.3733/001c.161571.

World Screwworm

continued from page 11

stock Insects Research Laboratory in Kerrville, TX. "Having any kind of forewarning system that helps guide surveillance and management decisions is a game changer in our fight to respond quickly to this urgent pest."

The integrated modeling system will guide researchers, ranchers, and public health officials in implementing strategic and targeted approaches in order to be prepared for possible outbreaks, and to enable responders to stay ahead of New World screwworm. The modeling system will help strengthen USDA's multipronged approach to combatting New World screwworm, which includes:

Strategically increasing surveillance efforts and directing resources such as aircraft, personnel, fly traps, and sterile insects to the areas where they offer the greatest protection and at precise times to cause the greatest impact. This targeted allocation speeds up detection and strengthens prevention efforts.

Implementation of SIT strategies. Success of the benchmark SIT program depends on knowing when and where to release sterile flies. SIT is a safe and proven technique for controlling New World screwworm populations and consists of releasing sterile flies into areas where New World screwworm is present or likely to spread. USDA uses insights from the models to identify optimal locations, timing, and the number of sterile flies to release for the most effective application, to interrupt their reproductive cycle and spread.

Assessing prevention strategy effectiveness. The models enable USDA agencies to assess how effective current and planned prevention strategies are at slowing the movement of New World screwworm in the U.S. and to make timely adjustments as needed.

"ARS developed predictive New World screwworm models that incorporate historic data like habitat use, host preferences, and environmental conditions into a science-based platform that are already being utilized to select areas for increased livestock and wildlife surveillance, adult fly trapping, and for implementing SIT," said Lohmeyer. "However, these models cannot predict every scenario, especially those impacted by unpredictable variables like people transporting infested animals."

Livestock owners should remain vigilant and never move an animal that exhibits signs of infestation or that is suspected of being infested. Livestock owners should work with their state animal health officials and ensure they are following all requirements before moving any livestock or wildlife in and out of infested areas.

If you spot signs of New World screwworm infestation in animals, report it to the appropriate responding official by visiting the USDA New World screwworm reporting page.

To obtain the latest information and updates about New World screwworm, visit screwworm.gov.

The Most Valuable Harvest May Be What You Learned

By Gillian Christie

At the end of a growing season, farmers have plenty of numbers to review. Yields, operating expenses, equipment performance, labor costs and market prices all help tell the story of the year.

But some of the most valuable information may not appear on a financial statement.

It comes from decisions you and your team made that resulted in success, unexpected challenges, missed opportunities, and new improvements that made a difference.

As you prepare for another year, the question is not simply what this season produced, but what it taught you.

Look Beyond the Numbers

In every business, we are accustomed to measuring results, whether through observation or the latest AI management system. Understanding why those results occurred and how to analyze them is critically important for future success and improved viability.

University of Minnesota Extension emphasizes the value of benchmarking farm performance, including comparing financial results over time and against similar operations. These comparisons can help identify strengths, weaknesses and opportunities to improve profitability

Numbers provide a starting point, but experience and personal observation adds context. It was Einstein who shared: "Information is not knowledge. The only source of knowledge is experience. You need experience to gain wisdom."

Perhaps an equipment breakdown revealed an overlooked maintenance issue. A scheduling adjustment improved efficiency. A new supplier proved more reliable, or an investment failed to deliver the expected return.

Each experience offers insight that can guide future decisions and adds to your personal valuable wisdom.

After more than 33 years of working with business owners and entrepreneurs, I have learned that experience alone does not necessarily lead to improvement. What matters is how we use it.

A successful season deserves examination just as much as a difficult one. Understanding what contributed to positive results helps identify strengths worth protecting and opportunities worth developing.

Question What Has Become Routine

Agriculture depends on experience and as Einstein observed, your hard earned wisdom. Generations of practical knowledge have helped farmers navigate uncertainty, changing conditions and demanding markets.

But experience can also create habits that go unquestioned.

A purchasing decision made five years ago may no longer offer the best value. A familiar operating procedure may consume unnecessary time. Equipment that once met an operation's needs may deserve another look as labor requirements and technology change.

This does not mean changing something simply for the sake of change. It means asking whether established practices still deliver the intended results.

I often return to a simple philosophy: Keep It Real.

In business, that means examining what is actually happening rather than relying on assumptions. Where is time being lost? Which expenses are increasing without a corresponding benefit? What are employees noticing that management may be overlooking?

Sometimes the most useful insights come from the people closest to the work.

Turn Experience Into Better Decisions

Penn State Extension reinforces the importance of maintaining production and financial records to evaluate business performance and make informed management decisions.[2] Records help reveal patterns that may otherwise be missed, particularly when reviewing costs, productivity and profitability.

But information becomes valuable only when it leads to a positive result.

A year-end review does not need to be complicated. Consider which decisions delivered the greatest value, which problems kept recurring and what could be handled differently.

Then identify two or three realistic improvements.

For an equipment dealer, that might mean improving parts availability or customer follow-up. For a grower, it could involve adjusting maintenance schedules, reconsidering equipment utilization or improving coordination during peak production periods.

The objective is not to create a long list of resolutions. It is to focus resources where they can make a meaningful difference.

The Value of Looking Back

Agriculture will always involve circumstances beyond our control. Weather, markets, labor availability and production challenges rarely follow a perfect plan.

What we can control is how thoughtfully we evaluate our choices and apply what we learn.

Strong businesses are not necessarily those that avoid every mistake. They are the ones willing to recognize what needs attention, preserve what works and make adjustments when circumstances call for them.

As you close out this season, consider what the year revealed about your operation beyond the numbers.

Because before deciding what you want to grow next year, it may be worth asking:

What did this year teach you?

If you would like assistance in evaluating and planning for improved success, give me a call.

Sources

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The Assumption About Farm Automation That May Be Wrong

Robots and AI Are Changing Orchard Work, but They Still Depend on People Who Know the Land

Apple-sorting conveyors in an orchard. (Getty)

by Amy Quinton

You've likely heard this assumption: When AI-enabled and autonomous machines arrive on the farm, jobs will disappear. But researchers at the University of California, Davis, who studied 16 fruit tree operations in California and Washington for three years, found that automation still takes human knowledge. What changes is how the work gets done. The study, drawing on 165 in-depth interviews with workers and growers, was published in the journal New Technology, Work and Employment.

The study examined what researchers call the "last mile" of agricultural automation: what happens after robotic and AI- enabled tools arrive on the farm and have to work in real conditions that can change by the hour.

"Automation isn't something that just happens to a farm or happens to a labor force," said lead author M. Anne Visser, professor of community and regional development in the UC Davis Department of Human Ecology. "People have to actively make it happen."

Every orchard is different, so technology must be adapted to each one. That often requires human knowledge about the land, the fruit or even the expected weather. No matter how good these machines get, Visser said, they may not be able to match that embedded place-based knowledge.

Where orchard technology falls short

For example, a tractor or ATV can automatically travel down orchard rows and scan trees with a digital camera that counts buds and fruit to help forecast yield. The technology mimics a farmworker physically counting buds on every sixth or seventh tree to estimate yield. But researchers found the technology tended to overestimate yield and often required interpretation through historical knowledge of the field. One farm manager with over a decade on the farm adjusted the camera's counts down by 14% because of historical understanding of block performance and recent weather events. His estimates ended up more accurate than the cameras'.

Even with tools in place, people are still needed to interpret what the technology is seeing, adapt it to field conditions, troubleshoot problems and bridge the gap between how a tool was designed to work and how farming actually works.

Autonomous harvesters are another example. Many prototypes can't seem to match the knowledge needed to pick fruit, Visser said. Even as the technology improves, many growers and workers believe it will still take a human to integrate it into a farm's production system and work alongside it.

"Replacing a task on a farm is not the same as replacing a job," said Visser. "These tools do not simply remove jobs on farms. They often change who does what and reshape the work around technology."

Fresh-market specialty crops are harder to automate than row crops such as corn or soybeans, Visser said, because they require quality as well as yield. Orchards are multiyear investments, and growers cannot switch out these crops in a single season. Still, as workers move into other farm roles, the technology can improve efficiency, occupational health and planning for labor shortages.

What it means for farm jobs

Visser said focusing only on displacement of workers can obscure opportunities for policy, workforce development, worker mobility and rural job creation.

"Our hope is that our research helps advance the conversation surrounding agricultural automation in agricultural and its impact on the labor force in a way that's more useful versus what it can often do, which is divide people pretty fast," she said.

Alex Bladimir Hernandez of UC Davis co-authored the paper. It was funded by the National Science Foundation and the University of California Office of the President.

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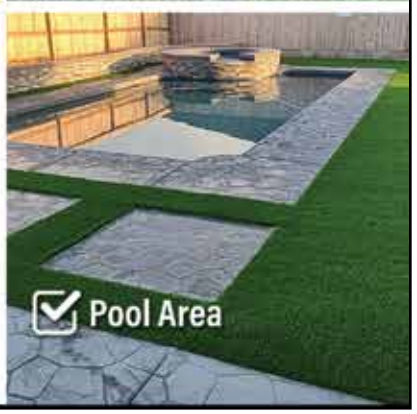

California AgTech Alliance opens applications for Innovation Grants of up to $50,000

A field technician installs a soil sensor in a citrus orchard during a UC ANR Innovate field demonstration. Photo by Hanif Houston

By Hanif R Houston

Ag tech startups can access field trials, technical expertise and commercialization support; applications due Nov. 20

The California AgTech Alliance is accepting applications for its Innovation Grants Program, which offers service vouchers of up to $50,000 to help agricultural technology startups test, validate and commercialize innovations that benefit California agriculture. Applications are due Nov. 20, 2026, at 11:59 p.m. PST.

Before a new ag tech solution is ready for growers, it needs to be tested in the field, refined and validated under real-world conditions. For many startups, de-risking the path to commercialization and adoption requires access to farms, specialized facilities, laboratory testing and business expertise that they can't easily find or afford.

Innovation Grants close that gap by providing startups with vouchers to access specialized services from participating providers including farms, research centers, laboratories and business advisers. UC Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR), which administers the program, pays providers directly. About $1.7 million in funding is expected to be available, and no matching funds are required.

The California AgTech Alliance is a statewide network connecting California's agricultural regions around shared priorities in innovation, workforce development and entrepreneurship.

"New agricultural technology has to prove itself in real growing conditions," said Helle Petersen, director of UC ANR Innovate. "This Innovation Grants Program connects startups with the research expertise, UC ANR Research and Extension Centers and agricultural partners that can help them test promising ideas and help bring practical solutions to growers."

A single proposal can combine services from more than one provider in three categories:

Land Services: Access to private farms, UC ANR Research and Extension Centers across the state and other agricultural sites for field trials, demonstrations and validation, plus related research or extension support.

Infrastructure and Technology Services: Research and development, prototyping, laboratory testing, specialized equipment or software, and user testing.

Professional Services: Customer discovery, commercialization strategy, market development, financial planning and investor readiness.

The $50,000 cap applies to all services in one proposal. The startup leads each project and is responsible for its technical direction, analysis and reporting.

"For an ag tech startup, the next step might be a field trial, technical testing or a clearer path to market," said Sarah Masterson, director of the California AgTech Alliance. "These vouchers help companies work with qualified providers, answer key technical and business questions and build the evidence growers want to see."

Applicants don't need to be based or incorporated in California. However, each project must show a clear benefit to California agriculture, and all voucher-funded services must be performed in the state.

Each project must address at least one of four priorities from the California Agricultural Research and Innovation Roadmap (PDF) and name one as its primary focus: Water and Soil Management, Automation and Technology, Pest Management, or Biomass Management.

Applications are reviewed competitively on technical merit, feasibility, team and provider capability, adoption potential, budget and grower support.

Farms, ranches, Research and Extension Centers, universities, laboratories and organizations offering technical or professional services can also apply to become service providers.

The request for applications, the startup application and service provider information are available at calagtechalliance.org/innovation-grants.

The Innovation Grants Program is funded by California Jobs First.

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UC receives nearly $1.5 million from USDA-NIFA for farm research lab in San Joaquin Valley

Agricultural Research and Innovation Laboratory Complex will be established at UC West Side Research and Extension Center in Fresno County

The University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources has been awarded $1,479,774 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture to establish a vital research lab in western Fresno County. UC ANR is matching the grant so the total project investment is nearly $3 million. The Agricultural Research and Innovation Laboratory Complex at UC West Side Research and Extension Center will allow scientists to study and diagnose problems more efficiently so farmers can get answers faster to reduce crop losses.

"This award recognizes the San Joaquin Valley, and California as a whole, as a preeminent producer of so much of our country's agricultural bounty," said Glenda Humiston, UC vice president for agriculture and natural resources. "Our farmers are incredibly resourceful and productive, but they need cutting-edge science to help overcome a host of difficult challenges, including water scarcity, severe drought, extreme weather, soil quality issues and ever-evolving pests and plant diseases. These enhanced lab facilities at West Side REC will enable researchers to better develop and deliver solutions to our growers with greater speed, efficiency, economy and effectiveness."

Located in in Five Points, the complex will close a critical infrastructure gap by providing environment-controlled laboratory units and associated training, meeting and research-support space for timely, field-integrated agricultural research and extension.

"The facility will enable scientists to process and analyze soil, water, plant, pest and environmental samples on site immediately after collection, rather than shipping them to distant laboratories," said Atef Swelam, director of UC West Side REC, which is operated by UC ANR. "This will reduce sample degradation, turnaround time, transportation and laboratory costs, and constraints on time-sensitive research, while improving data quality, collaboration and the efficiency of field-based investigations."

The project will strengthen UC West Side REC's capacity to generate science-based solutions for the San Joaquin Valley's major agricultural challenges. The new equipment will accelerate research that helps farmers sustain profitability while meeting water, environmental and regulatory challenges. The flexible laboratory capacity will support current and newly recruited UC Cooperative Extension scientists in groundwater, integrated pest management, postharvest, vertebrate pests, soil and water, and agricultural innovation and technology.

With the new meeting and training space, UC Cooperative Extension also will be able to expand its hands-on workforce development for beginning farmers and training for other community members.

The complex will also serve as a regional research and education resource for scientists at UC campuses, California State University Fresno, USDA Agricultural Research Service, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, visiting scientists, public agencies, nonprofit partners and industry collaborators.

"By strengthening the region's capacity to conduct timely, field-based research and translate their findings into practical recommendations, scientists working at the Agricultural Research and Innovation Laboratory Complex will help farmers across California

UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER 2026

11: Veterans Day: The U.S. Forest Service Recreation fee-free day. For more information visit www.fs.usda.gov/visit/passes-permits.

11: Join the CAWG PAC for a reception at Elevation Ten at the historic Old Sugar Mill in Clarksburg. Don't miss this opportunity to support the CAWG PAC while visiting a boutique winery inside Clarksburg's historic Old Sugar Mill, 35265 Willow Ave, Clarksburg, CA 95612. To register https://pci.jotform.com/form/262645778529171.

JANUARY 2027

26-28 2027 Unified Wine and Grape Symposium. Every January, the Unified Wine & Grape Symposium trade show is home to over 650 suppliers to the wine and grape industry. With thousands of industry professionals attending and over 700 booths, the Symposium is the largest wine & grape industry conference and trade show of its kind in North America. SAFE Credit Union Convention Center, Sacramento, CA.

FEBRUARY 2027

2-4: 62nd Annual Colusa Farm Show. The Granddaddy of all Farm Shows! For six decades, the Colusa Farm Show has been the one stop shop event for agricultural professionals, farmers, and rural enthusiasts. Explore the latest innovations in farm equipment, technology, and services. Connect with industry experts, farmers and ranchers. Discover new products and services to enhance your agricultural operations. Website: www.colusafairgrounds.com farmshow@colusacountyfair.com Phone: 530-458-2641.

9-11 2027 World Ag Expo. More than 1,200 exhibitors display the latest in farm equipment, communications, and technology on 2.6 million square feet of exhibit space. Free seminars focus on a variety of topics important to dairy producers, farmers, ranchers, and agribusiness professionals. World Ag Expo® is a can't miss show for anyone in Ag. Contact info@farmshow.org, 559.688.1030, 1.800.999.9186.

To list your special event in California Farm Equipment send details to CFEM, PO Box 1128, Visalia, CA. 93279. or email to: info@cfemag.com.

Webinars in November highlight steps to transition livestock operations to organic

Spanish interpretation available for free series organized by CAFF and UC

A free lunchtime webinar series featuring experienced organic livestock producers, certifiers and University of California scientists will guide farmers and ranchers seeking to transition their cattle, poultry and other livestock.

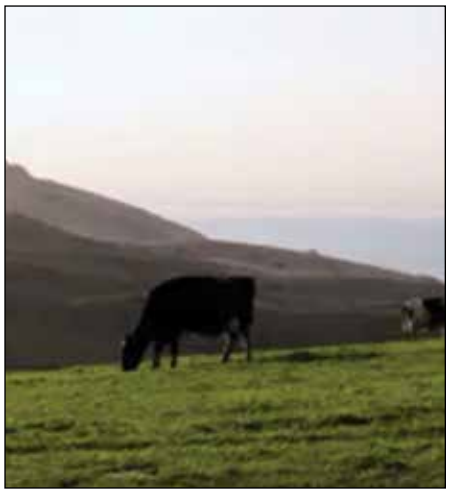
The "Transition to Organic: Livestock Webinar Series," every Thursday from Nov. 5 to Nov. 19, includes panel discussions, expert presentations and Q&A. The series will cover the organic certification process, organic livestock economics, market and processing considerations, and tips from experienced organic beef, dairy and poultry producers.

Learn more and register; real-time Spanish interpretation will be available for each session.

The series is organized and sponsored by the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, UC Cooperative Extension and the UC Organic Agriculture Institute (an institute of UC Agriculture and Natural Resources).

California leads the nation in the number of certified organic operations, certified acreage and organic sales. A study by UC scientists found that, in 2022, 1.3 million organic acres were used for animal production and that increases in total organic acreage at that time were predominately due to changes in organic animal production acreage. As more livestock producers transition to organic, support of those producers is paramount to move California closer to the statewide goal of 20% organic cropland by 2045.

"We are excited to partner with UC ANR to bring more organic transition resources to livestock producers in California; farmers and ranchers want to hear from their peers and trusted advisors before deciding whether organic is right for their operation," said Grace Jackson, a webinar co-organizer with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers. "Building on the success of our crop series, these webinars bring together ranchers, farmers and UC Cooperative Extension specialists for practical, real-world learning."



There are over 100 organic dairy producers in California. Photo by Randi Black

Organizers designed the series with California livestock farmers and ranchers in mind, directly addressing issues that a variety of agricultural operations face.

"California has a long history of organic production and there are many successful and innovative organic farmers and ranchers in the state," said Katharina Ullmann, a series co-organizer with the UC Organic Agriculture Institute. "This webinar will include tips from experienced producers and clear guidance on how to become certified organic as a livestock operation."

Registration and information on the "Transition to Organic: Livestock Webinar Series" can be found on the UC OAI website: ucanr.edu/program/uc-organic-agriculture-institute/event/livestock-transition-organic-webinar-series.

The series is made possible through funding from the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) State Organic Program and the CDFA Office of Agricultural Resilience and Sustainability.

UC Agriculture and Natural Resources brings UC information and practices to all 58 California counties. Through research and Cooperative Extension in agriculture, natural resources, nutrition, economic and youth development, our mission is to improve the lives of all Californians. Learn more at ucanr.edu.

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