



UC Cooperative Extension marks 100 years of service

Issue Date: [May 7, 2014](#)

By Ching Lee



University of California Cooperative Extension 100 year logo
Logo/UCCE



Since the creation of University of California Cooperative Extension 100 years ago, farmers and farm advisors have worked together to bring research-based information, technologies and practices to the field, as seen in the vintage photo of a grower and advisor.

Photo/UCCE Archives



San Diego County nursery producer Michael Anthony Mellano and UCCE reseacher James Bethke examine a pheromone trap for insect pests in 2007.

Photo/UCCE Archives



A farm advisor in 1920 works in an orchard.

Photo/UCCE Archives



A Humboldt County farm hosts a field trial

Photo/UCCE Archives



UCCE farm and home advisors pose together for this 1958 photo.
Photo/UCCE Archives



Sacramento farm advisor stands next to an extension vehicle.
Photo/UCCE Archives

A strong historic connection binds University of California Cooperative Extension, California farmers and ranchers, and Farm Bureau, particularly in light of UCCE's centennial celebration.

This week marks the 100th anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act, legislation that created the national cooperative extension system to bring research-based knowledge and outreach to farmers and families in order to improve the quality of rural life. The extension also played a critical role during World War I by helping farmers boost the nation's food production to meet wartime needs.

While the state extension service and California agriculture have evolved during the last century, farmers and UC researchers agree that their partnership continues to be vital to tackling the challenges facing California farmers and ranchers today.

Michael Anthony Mellano, a San Diego County nursery producer, described the farmer-researcher relationship as "critically important." Mellano, who received his Ph.D. in plant pathology from UC Riverside and whose family has worked on numerous research projects with the university through the years, stressed the need to continue the UCCE tradition of applied, field-related research to help farms be more efficient, cost effective and competitive.

"(California agriculture) is without a doubt one of the most complex and most productive agricultural systems in the world, and that presents its own set of challenges," Mellano said. "We've gotten there because of the efforts and the cooperative environment between the University of California and farmers and the Farm Bureau. That just needs to continue and grow and be nurtured."

At the start, the university required local farmers and ranchers to organize into county "farm bureaus" as a condition for receiving the extension service's education programs and for a farm advisor to be appointed to the county. Farm Bureau centers served as venues for meetings with farm advisors, who shared information on new farming techniques, did field demonstrations, answered questions and gave advice.

"UCCE has played a critical role in elevating California agriculture to global prominence by assisting farmers and ranchers in powering one of the most productive agricultural economies in the world," California Farm Bureau Federation President Paul Wenger said. "In the next century, UCCE will be just as important, as California farmers will be asked to maintain their agricultural prominence, while also being asked to produce more with fewer inputs and to reduce environmental impacts."

Although modern technology and communication methods now play a greater role in how information is dispensed, the cooperative spirit between farmers and researchers has endured, said Jim Sullins, UCCE county director in Tulare and Kings counties.

"Where people go for their information has changed tremendously," he said. "Frankly, the producer doesn't want to come to the office for a meeting. They don't have time for that. Everybody's lives are more complex, so they want their information at their fingertips. It's not like it was 30, 40 years ago, where the main way you got information was holding a meeting."

With the use of the Internet, email, social media and cell phones, Sullins said farm advisors can actually reach more people today without having to travel the long distances they had to before. He noted how his dairy advisor has done webinars that are then posted on YouTube.

Sullins first came to UCCE in 1983 as a livestock and range advisor, and became a county director in 1992. During that time, he said he's seen a continuing decline in UCCE staff and no new state funding for programs. At the same time, funding from grants and commodity groups at the county level has increased, he noted.

Barbara Allen-Diaz, vice president of the UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, acknowledged that the number of extension advisors and specialists has shrunk in the last 25 years, but she said the university is "fully committed to rebuilding that academic footprint" and "moving as fast as we can."

She noted that UC has hired 44 new advisors and specialists since 2012, with another 30 hires expected in the next few months. With half of UCCE advisors over 55 years old and many of them retiring, Allen-Diaz said she's been able to hire more people using salaries from the retirement pool.

"I'm being very strategic in protecting that source of money, because there are no new resources," she said.

Mellano said he thinks UC is working hard to address farmers' needs within its budgetary constraints, but he said he would still like to see more applied research done at the farm level to address issues such as water, sustainability, mechanization and labor, and crop production.

While helping farmers has been a major focus of Cooperative Extension, the service also has a rich history of providing youth development through the 4-H program and of education in home economics and general home improvement programs. As the nation urbanized, its programs expanded to include nutrition education and workshops on gardening.

Pam Geisel, who retired last year as director of the UCCE Master Gardeners Program, started as an environmental horticulture advisor in 1981, shortly after the new gardening program was launched in response to the growing number of calls advisors were getting from home gardeners. The program now trains volunteers to be expert gardeners so they can help others.

She said even though master gardeners do not work with commercial farmers, they provide a bridge to local

food production by showing the urban public how to grow their own food and build community gardens.

"It'll be interesting to see who the primary clientele of Cooperative Extension ends up being in the future," she said. "Growers and farmers are really knowledgeable now and they have access to a lot of information via the Internet. So what's our role? What's our purpose? How do we extend the new applied research that comes up?"

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