Director’s Report: Stay Connected with Other Farmers, UC Ag Experts

As farmers you face tough challenges every day. The stakes are high and the decisions, regulations and new technologies continue to multiply.

It’s important to stay on top of what is coming and also to stay connected with other farmers in your area and with new developments in the crops you farm. The Sustainable Cotton Project and its project the San Joaquin Sustainable Farming Project offer growers ways to do just that.

We link growers with each other and with the latest crop news and information from University of California experts and others in the ag business. It’s an easy way to keep up, enrolling a field or orchard into the project will also provide a second set of eyes on that field with our experienced field scouts providing a written scouting report each week, our weekly blog lets growers know what’s going on and our frequent field days provide the latest crop information and a chance to weigh in on topics for future meetings. And the best news, there is no cost to join.

“You get together with other growers and find out about different things,” he said about the field days. “It’s outstanding to have access to that kind of expert knowledge,” says Biola almond grower Howard Eastom.

The 2016 season has been a good one for our project growers with few pest infestations and good harvests all around. We look forward to 2017 with the same expectations and hope that we can bring in new fields, orchards and growers.

Please take the time to connect with the project and find out more about enrolling. Your information is always confidential and the project provides an opportunity to be connected with other growers and support your goals of sustainability and good stewardship. SCP and the SJSFP look forward to promoting the important and vital contributions that growers’ like you are making to California agriculture. Why not join us in 2017?

For more information or to enroll, contact Marcia Gibbs at (530) 370-5325 or Marcia@sustainablecotton.org.
Almond Growers Can Plant the Seeds for Healthy Soil and Bees by Gilbert Mohtes-Chan

When the almond trees are in full bloom in the San Joaquin Valley the orchards are abuzz with bees going from one flower to another at the height of the pollination season.

After the petals fall, the bees start running low on food. That’s when beekeepers return and prepare to move some 1.7 million bee colonies out of state or on to other pollination jobs in Southern California.

However, a program called Seeds for Bees offers San Joaquin Valley almond growers an opportunity to provide additional forage for bees while boosting nutrients in their orchard soil. They can do so by planting cover crops.

Under a program by Project Apis m., a Paso Robles-based nonprofit organization, almond growers can purchase cover crop seed mixes to plant between the orchard rows. The seed mixes are designed to flower before or after almond bloom, which increases the time pollen is available for bees.

When bees run out of additional forage, they are provided supplements to hold them over until they are moved to locations where new pollen sources are available, including the Great Plains and Midwest.

Named after a European honeybee, Project Apis m. promotes honeybee health. The group points to research that indicates providing bees with pollen sources, such as cover crops before almond bloom, will increase the bee population and make them healthier and stronger to pollinate the almonds. The group says cover crops won’t compete with almond bloom.

“Your almonds provide bees with a large quantity of high protein pollen in a relatively small area, making it easy for bees to collect. Bees want to work almonds,” Project Apis m. says.

Bees find cover crops such as mustard and clover are hard to get to because they are on the ground, making it less appealing for bees to go after. Bees also work all the pollen from the almonds by mid-afternoon before searching for other food sources.

By having more pollen available, the queen can lay more eggs to increase the bee population, motivating the bees to collect even more food to feed their young. All this stimulates pollination activity in the orchard.

So what’s in it for growers? First, cover crops increase the organic matter, nitrogen and soil fertility in the orchard. They allow water to soak into the ground, which keeps the soil from washing away. Generating less run-off improves water quality downstream. Cover crops also help with the decomposition of mummy nuts.

In addition, cover crops help control weeds and keep the soil from drying out. This creates firmer ground for better access during the fall and winter months. If growers are concerned about competing blooms during almond bloom, they can go ahead and mow the ground cover, according to University of California Cooperative Extension farm advisors.

UCCE pomologist David Doll says bloom competition isn’t significant during good years, especially when there are not a lot of windy, cold or rainy days. If that’s the case, he says growers can go ahead and mow the cover crop to get the most bee hours available.

Bee experts also say their field checks have shown little competition between almond and cover crop blooms. Growers can do their own evaluation by going out to the orchard and comparing bee activity in the trees and the cover crops.

To learn more about Seeds for Bees, visit the Project Apis m. website at http://projectapism.org
High-quality Cleaner Cotton™ grown here in the Central Valley will be heading across the Pacific and making its way to high-end towels produced to honor the XXXII Olympiad in Tokyo.

Yes, some 1,300 days from now tourists and locals can look for the Cleaner Cotton™ label at the 2020 games, which organizers say will be “the most innovative ever organized, and will rest on three fundamental principles to transform the world: striving for your personal best (achieving your personal best); accepting one another (unity in diversity); and passing on a legacy for the future (connecting to tomorrow)”.

This exciting development stems from Sustainable Cotton Project’s relationship with the Japanese company Moraltex, which began a number of years ago when Mr. Mori, a long-time Japanese textile professional and co-founder of the company, came to California looking for quality cotton. Mori was initially looking for organic cotton, but since there was none available in California, he chose to use Cleaner Cotton™.

During a SCP farm tour, Mori cited the reasons for his choice: SCP growers make a commitment to more biologically based practices, SCP scouts know each field and grower and check the fields on a weekly basis, growers use less of the most harmful chemicals on cotton and they have formed a grower group where individuals support each other.

Mori purchased Cleaner Cotton™ fiber in 2014 and tested it through spinners and towel manufacturing facilities in Japan. The fiber was well received. The resulting towels were displayed at this year’s annual SCP Cotton Tour in October.

Three representatives from Moraltex joined the SCP farm tour this fall. They enjoyed meeting the SCP farmers, tour participants and SCP staff and explained their plans for the cotton. They also met with Calcot and Jess Smith and Sons. And, the good news is that they are interested in purchasing more Cleaner Cotton™ fiber for towel production. What an honor it will be to have beautiful towels crafted from SCP’s Cleaner Cotton™ as symbols of the Olympic spirit of quality and perfection.

The towels were the highlight of the product showing on the Cotton Tour. Repeat customer, Lydia Wendt of California Cloth Foundry, also showed her U.S.-made towel prototypes to farm tour participants, along with cut and sew knit garments made from Cleaner Cotton™. Her towels are being developed for a hotel chain, and Wendt is talking to hospitality industry representatives to discuss broader applications for the product. We will update you on developments.

We all may have to head to Japan to see how it all unfolds.
New Online Resource for Growers

The San Joaquin Sustainable Farming Project is preparing a set of grower resource guides to help growers navigate useful topics and ideas and sustainable practices from existing on-line resources. Each topic contains general information and where to find current and pertinent materials and weblinks to that information. The goal is to provide growers with an easy way to find the most up to date information and to help them become familiar with using web based resources. Some of the topics will include: pesticide resistance management, VOC emissions, and where to find the latest crop research on alfalfa, almonds and cotton. The Grower Resource Guides will be available on the Sustainable Cotton Project website in early January. We hope you will check them out. See www.sustainablecotton.org.

You can find us online at the following:
WEBSITE: www.sustainablecotton.org
FIELD DAY VIDEOS: http://www.sustainablecotton.org/videos
FACEBOOK: https://www.facebook.com/sustainable.farmingproject
BLOG: http://centralvalleyfarmscout.blogspot.com/

Are there topics that you’d like to see featured in this newsletter?
All questions, comments, feedback are welcome, please direct to jenny@sustainablecotton.org

Funding for this project has been provided through an agreement with the State Water Resources Control Board and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency- Clean Water Act Section 319