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PEST CONTROL NETWORK ADVISER WORKFORCE AGING, DWINDLING

By Harry Cline, Farm Press Editorial Staff

The graying of America is on a collision course with the feeding of America.

One of the key elements in California's ability to feed millions in American and around the world from its 350 crops producing \$32 billion annually in food and fiber products are the state's 4,100 licensed Pest Control Advisers.

Members of the Western Plant Health Association heard recently that this network of state-licensed PCAs who monitor and recommend pest control measures are mostly baby boomers facing retirement. There are few young people now in the profession to replace them. The industry is stepping up its efforts to recruit PCAs from colleges and universities.

Terry Stark, executive director of the California Association of Pest Control Advisers, said a survey of CAPCA's 3,100 members revealed that almost 40 percent of its members are over 55. Only 17 percent are 44 or younger. Thirty-five percent are 45 to 55.

Twenty-five percent of CAPCA members have more than 30 years experience. Over half have more than 20 years of experience.

The PCA demographic survey released by CAPCA earlier this year put statistics to what people like Les Lyman of the Tremont Group already knew: It has become increasingly harder for retail pesticide and fertilizer dealers to hire qualified PCAs.

Lyman shared the labor panel with Stark and Jennifer Ryder

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Fox, the new dean of the college of agriculture at California State University, Chico. Fox held a similar position for four years at her alma mater, Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, before moving to Chico earlier this year.

California's annual agricultural production income ranks first among all states and is twice that of the next closest state. If ranked separately, California's agricultural economy is the fifth largest in the world, behind only the United States, the European Union, China and Brazil.

California exports almost a fourth of what it produces. Exports total more than \$8 billion annually.

It is also the most regulated agricultural industry in the nation. The California Department of Pesticide Regulation-licensed PCA is an important cog in maintaining the state's farm productivity while keeping the regulatory process running smoothly through mandatory written recommendations for crop protection measures. Many PCAs also make nutrient recommendations.

Sixteen percent of today's PCAs work for distributor/retailers versus 26 percent in 1999. Twenty-two percent are independent PCAs. Seven years ago, 14 percent were independent. There are fewer government agency/municipal PCAs (19 percent in 2006 vs. 25 percent in 1999) and about the same percentage of basic manufacturer PCAs (15 percent) and in-house PCAs (17 percent) as there were seven years ago.

Lyman has been the owner of independent ag chem retail outlets for many years.

"There is a diminishing labor pool. It is getting increasingly difficult for the independent retailer to find and keep good people," Lyman said.

Lyman believes promoting within; solid training programs; and empowering people to make decisions are ways to keep

good PCAs.

"Promoting and rewarding teamwork is important in keeping good people. An open-door to management is also critical," he said.

All three panelists agreed that college recruiting and even introducing young people to California agriculture in high school and elementary schools is where the industry will find the new generation of PCAs.

Stark, who has been on the job a little more than a year, says CAPCA has redoubled its efforts to reach out more aggressively to community colleges and four-year universities to entice students to follow curriculums that will lead to qualifications for taking the PCA exam.

"We have to enhance our visibility and attract new professionals to our industry," said Stark. "Many students really do not what they want to do. It is up to us to help them make choices."

CAPCA now offers free student memberships if the student is enrolled in course work related to becoming a PCA. College recruiting dinners are being revived.

Fox, a Cal Poly plant sciences graduate, promoted a curriculum there when she was the dean of the ag college. She is doing the same thing now at Chico State, where the ag college attracts mostly animal science majors.

At Cal Poly there is a curriculum that will lead to qualifying to take a PCA exam, and she hopes to install the same program at Chico State. One of the problems with getting graduates to become PCAs is that they often do not have the course-work to qualify to take the state-mandated exam.

"Students often find out too late in their college career they do not have the course-work to take the exam," she said. They do not want to return to college after graduation to pick up those credits.

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