

Growers weigh PR campaign to counter drought coverage

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An “action alert” went out last month to the 900 members of the Madera County Farm Bureau (MCFB).

The emailed message, sent by Anja Raudabaugh, executive director of the MCFB, urged members to help fund a “major” public relations campaign to counter reports in the media critical of ag’s role in the state’s ongoing drought.

“Since the Governor’s announcement that California’s urban users will only be receiving a 25 percent allocation of their typical water supply this year, agriculture has been under siege and on the defensive,” Raudabaugh wrote in the June 5 email, which was also sent to various media outlets including *The Business Journal*.

“Erroneously reported as using 80 percent of the state’s total water supply, compounded with the equally ignorant statistic of providing only two percent of the state’s GDP, agriculture has been hammered over and over again [in the media] and the hits just seem to keep coming,” Raudabaugh said. “The worst of the heat isn’t even upon us and we’re being roasted alive.”

“Many of you have contacted us indicating that agriculture needs to do something to set the record straight,” Raudabaugh added.

Her email was actually prompted by informal discussions that started earlier this year at the California Farm Bureau Federation (CFBF) when Paul Wenger, CFBF’s president, suggested the organization could try to raise as much as \$1 million to fund an ag-friendlier public relations counter attack.

The Western Growers Association, California Farm Water Coalition and industry heavyweights like Paramount Farms voiced their support for the plan.

Raudabaugh said her goal in the effort is to raise \$50,000.

“We’re not there yet but we are getting steady donations,” she said. “People are very generous and believe in the cause. We’re getting checks every day for \$50, \$100, even \$500, and are hoping to reach our goal by mid-July.”

Raudabaugh said the MCFB board has committed to matching those donations up to \$50,000. But Raudabaugh herself will not be able to see this campaign to its conclusion.

Less than a week after sending the email, she accepted a position as CEO of Western United Dairymen. Her last day in Madera was June 26 and she starts at Western United in mid-July.

Wenger said recently that he was “kind of surprised” when he first read Raudabaugh’s email.

“It may have been a little bit of putting the cart before the horse,” he said. “I admire her enthusiasm and commend her for taking the initiative. But we’re still trying to figure out whether there’s enough interest out there.”

“The real test,” Wenger added, “is if people are willing to support the idea with their checkbooks. I don’t think we’d undertake a full-blown PR campaign unless we can raise at least a couple hundred thousand dollars.”

Wenger is a third-generation farmer who grows almonds and walnuts outside of Modesto. “Almonds certainly have been taking a lot of heat in the press,” he said. “None of us enjoy reading those types of stories.”

California’s \$6.5 billion almond industry has been a target of so-called “drought shamers,” who criticize the relatively large amounts of water needed to grow the lucrative nut crop.

A recent Associated Press story was headlined ‘Almonds get roasted in debate over California water use’ while earlier this month, a Los Angeles Times story posited the question: Are almond farmers “drought villains.”

“It’s definitely a tough time to be a farmer,” said Tricia Stever Blattler, executive director of the Tulare County Farm Bureau. “In this drought, farm groups are being attacked from all fronts.”

Blattler has not sent out a fundraising letter but said her members would likely support a pro-ag public relations campaign.

“I’ve been waiting to see where the state [CFBF’s] efforts went,” she said this week. “There’s definitely been a tremendous amount of misleading reporting on ag’s use of water during this drought.”

On its website, Paramount Farms, one of the state’s biggest almond growers, is trying to combat the negative publicity by promoting its commitment to “water stewardship ... We believe that reducing water usage is the most important issue facing California farming today, and have invested nearly \$25 million in exploring water-efficient irrigation practices.”

“As water supplies shrink, more and more people suffer,” said Wenger, who continues to advocate for a dramatic increase in the state’s water storage facilities. “We’re getting to some dire straits. It could get really nasty as this stretches into July and August.”

Recently, the Los Angeles Times profiled Valley almond farmer Joe Del Bosque.

Noting that Del Bosque is being forced to fallow more and more acreage — and employ fewer farmworkers — columnist Robin Abcarian wrote, “Picking on almond farmers might be all the rage, but it will do nothing to solve the state’s water shortage. If people understood that, perhaps they wouldn’t be so quick to judge.”

Del Bosque has had his share of media attention lately, providing tours of his drought-stricken operations to both Governor Brown and President Obama. He had his own take on ag’s recent public relations challenges. “Farmers,” he said, “just aren’t very good at communicating.”

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