

# Farmers take tech to new heights

By John Holland  
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Dairy farmers wave high-tech wands near ear tags to keep track of their cows' health. Almond growers fly drones over the orchards to check on tree vigor.

And out on the West Side, bean growers use social media to urge young mothers to buy their products.

These methods and more were discussed at a gathering last week in Hilmar, put on by a Salinas-based company called AgTech Insight and several partners.

Experts talked about systems that track fertilizer and pesticide use on the farm and sanitation measures in processing plants. Such information can be conveyed to consumers curious about the sources of their food.

"You're making a good-faith effort to monitor those things, and it's marketable, trust me," said Jonathan Hoff, chief executive officer at Monte Vista Farming Co., which grows and processes almonds east of Denair.

About 80 people turned out at the Hilmar Cheese Co. visitors center for the event, which had cosponsors from farming, finance, media and other fields.

Technology is nothing new. Tractors replaced horses more than a century ago, and the 1980s brought desktop computers to farms and other businesses. Today's mobile phones and tablets have brought technology right to the field, and small unmanned aircraft watch from above.

Hoff said technology helps with mapping, yield predictions, regulatory compliance, food safety, theft prevention and other tasks.

'This is an opportunity for growers, because they know agriculture.'

Seig Magenheim, AgTech Insight

The magic wands for dairy farmers use radio frequencies to keep track of their animals' breeding, feed, health and production.

"Each cow counts," said David Folly, chief operating officer at Farmeron, a tech company based in Turlock. "Individual animal economics are the key to success."

Chris Binfield, COO at Meras Engineering in Modesto, said growers who have installed water-saving drip irrigation need to keep monitoring it to ensure that the ground is evenly watered.

The California Dry Bean Advisory Board has launched an online campaign to market the limas, blackeyes and other types, many of them grown in western Stanislaus County.

Growers aim to reach chefs and dieticians, along with "mommy bloggers" on Facebook and Pinterest, said marketing consultant Alison Cox Verissimo of Turlock, whose family raises the crop.

She said growers should publicize their water efficiency, family history, core values and other information to consumers.

"If you don't tell your story, nobody else will," said Cox Verissimo, whose clients also include almond, pecan and rice

growers.

Investors are interested in agricultural technology companies, to the tune of about \$680 million in California in the first half of this year, said Seana Day Hull, director of business development and strategy at AgTech Insight and managing director with Centerra Capital in Modesto.

Sieg Magenheim, who manages irrigation and soil at AgTech Insight and helped introduce drip tape to the Salinas Valley, agreed.

“This is an opportunity for growers, because they know agriculture,” he said.

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