



PACIFIC COAST  
FARMERS' MARKET  
ASSOCIATION

## CALIFORNIA'S AG VISION COMES INTO FOCUS



I recently had the honor of speaking on a panel about community partnerships at the [University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources](#) (UC ANR) Conference in Fresno. Joining me as I spoke about farmers markets and food access programs like [Market Match](#), were speakers who shared the important work happening in the [Farms to School](#) and [Community Garden](#) movements. Each of our individual efforts are on parallel tracks. While we rarely engage directly, we are all committed to a common goal of supporting a healthier local food system and healthier Californians.

One of the highlights of the conference was the opening keynote by [Karen Ross](#), Secretary of the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA). Secretary Ross is something of a hero in the farmers market community for her efforts at the beginning of the pandemic to ensure that our state's farmers markets were included in the definition of essential businesses so our markets could continue to operate.

Secretary Ross spoke about CDFA's [Ag Vision](#), a strategic plan to help ensure California's agriculture industry remains vibrant, resilient, and successful over the next decade. She started by sharing Ag Vision's purpose statement: *Making California a better place to live because of what we grow and how we grow it.*

The purpose statement is both surprising and commendable. Rather than focusing on farmers – as a document entitled Ag Vision might be expected to do – the statement focuses on all Californians and how our state's agriculture sector contributes to a better quality of life for everyone, even those who never set foot on a farm. This is a sentiment that we at PCFMA wholeheartedly share. While our primary focus is on our farmers and other vendors and the incredible food that they make available, we also know that the presence of a farmers market brings life and vibrancy to communities. Businesses whose

storefronts open up to streets and plazas occupied by farmers markets tell us that they see increased foot traffic when the farmers market is open.

It was also gratifying to see farmers markets and nutrition assistance programs, such as the [Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program](#) (SFMNP), highlighted in Ag Vision as key to supporting healthy local communities. This vocal support for SFMNP is especially important right now as debate about the federal Farm Bill is gaining momentum. Two members of Congress from Ohio have sponsored a bill to increase funding for SFMNP and its companion program that serves families enrolled in the WIC food program. PCFMA and its partners at the [Farmers Market Coalition](#) are monitoring this bill – the [Farmers Market and Food Bank Local Revitalization Act](#) – in hopes that it gains additional sponsors and can begin moving through the legislative process in the US House of Representatives.


Speakers at the UC ANR conference offered a wide range of views on the challenges facing California agriculture and the opportunities for our state's farmers. Not all of those views, however, were well-received. A representative of a major agricultural trade organization dismissed the efforts of agricultural training programs that assist farm workers in becoming farm owners, arguing that the resources would be better put into training farm workers to operate emerging farm technologies. While I, and other conference attendees I spoke to, support the development of farm technologies that can increase yields while decreasing inputs and reducing on-farm injuries, we disagree with the suggestion that training a new generation of farmers is not a good use of resources.

In a recent survey, more than 20% of PCFMA's farmers said they had been operating their farm businesses for less than 10 years. Nearly all those new farmers also indicated that the farms were owned and operated by women or ethnic minorities. Opening opportunities to new farmers often means opening opportunities to those who have been excluded from the farming community and we welcome these new farmers and the energy and innovation that they bring.

PCFMA, CDFA and UC ANR all have significantly different roles within California's agriculture system, but we are all optimistic about its future to feed our state and help sustain our state's economic growth.



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