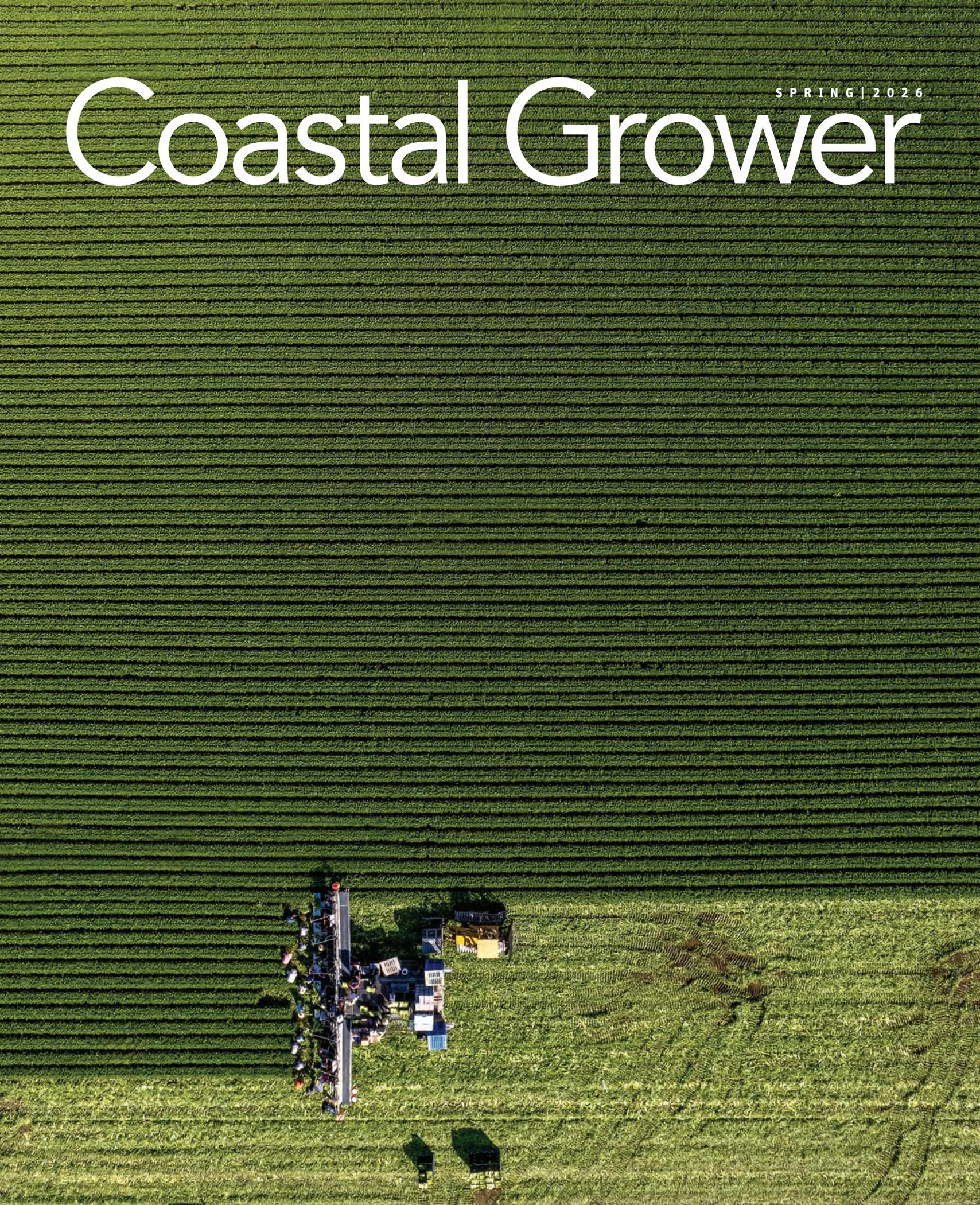


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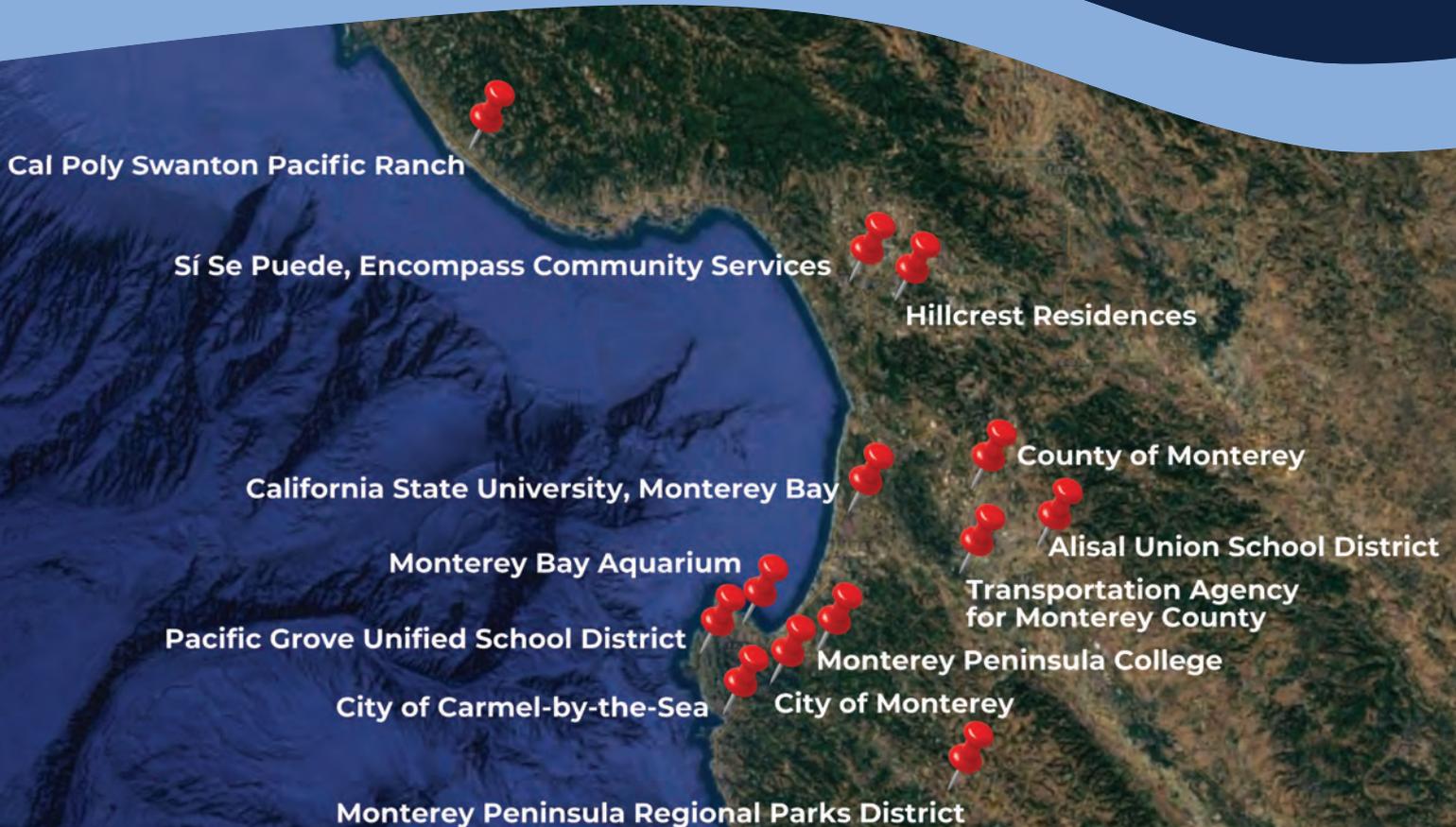
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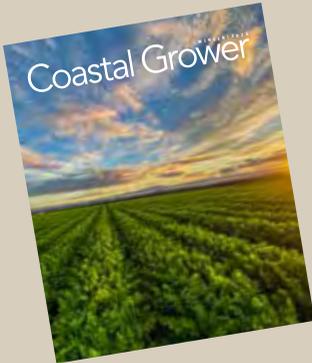


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# Women-Owned

One of my favorite movies of all time is *Places in the Heart*. Set in 1935, during the Great Depression, a quiet town in Texas is shaken when the sheriff is accidentally shot and killed.

The sheriff's widow, Edna Spalding, is left to raise their two young children. She quickly finds herself facing financial ruin. The local banker tells her to sell their farm, but she refuses. Instead, she asks him to teach her how to write a check.

That night, a drifter named Moses arrives at Edna's door looking for work. He claims to know how to farm cotton and offers to help. She feeds him but sends him away. The next morning, she finds him chopping wood in her yard. She feeds him again, but Moses later steals silverware and is caught. When the police bring him back, Edna decides not to press charges and instead hires him.

As cotton prices continue to fall, Edna realizes she cannot meet the next mortgage payment. She learns of a \$100 prize awarded to the first farmer to bring in a bale of cotton. With Moses's help, Edna assembles a team of pickers and races to harvest the cotton. Moses teaches her how to negotiate fairly with the buyer, and their gamble pays off—they win the prize and sell the cotton at a fair price, enough to save the farm.

Edna was one of the first women farmers to inspire me, but not the last.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has named 2026 The International Year of the Woman Farmer, a global campaign aimed at recognizing women's indispensable yet often overlooked contributions to global agrifood systems.

Californians know women play an essential role in agriculture and our Central Coast agriculture industry is lucky to have a multitude of women leaders in the cattle, produce, and wine industries. Since the inception of the State, a woman's right to landownership has been protected.

As a retired chairman and chief executive officer of a women-owned agricultural business, this topic hits

home. When my father passed away unexpectedly in 2006, I stepped in to represent my family's interests. Our attorney pointed out the fact a majority of our shareholders were women thus we could apply to be certified as women-owned.

At the time many of our customers had vendor diversity programs so we decided to pursue the certification. Easy, breezy, right? Not so fast.

The most respected and recognized certification agency is the Women Business Enterprise Council (WBENC). A key factor was the business had to be owned and operated by women. At the time I was the minority on our three-person board of directors, so we made the decision to recruit two outside women board members—a major decision for a family-owned business.

After providing binders of documents, an on-site visit (yes, they checked to see if our signage out front was permanent), and proof of gender for our female shareholders we became WBENC certified.

It was a strategic card in our hand, and we played it that way. I would never be naïve or presumptuous enough to walk into a customer's office and say "hey, buy from us, we are women-owned." Instead, we identified their pains, made our claims, and showed them the measured gains by doing business with us. At the end we'd pull out the certificate and say, "and by the way, we can help meet your vendor diversity goals." I would always say it made a win-win a "win-win-win."

An unexpected and surprising benefit of being women-owned was employee recruitment. Many of them said they decided to join our ranks because we were a women-owned business. Moms selling to moms, so to speak. Unlike Edna, I knew how to write a check when I took charge, but like Edna I drew strength from others around me that taught me how to navigate farming, harvesting, and negotiating.

To all the women farmers out there—2026 is your year. Go get 'em.



# Contributors



## ADAM JOSEPH

Adam Joseph is committed to providing thought-provoking editorial content, a craft honed over 15 years as a professional editor and writer. A multiple first-place California Journalism Award recipient, his work has appeared in the Monterey County Weekly, Relix, Gayot, 65 Degrees, Metro Silicon Valley, and the Salinas Californian. After serving as managing editor and interim editor at Good Times Santa Cruz, he joined Rancho Cielo, where for over two years he has used his expertise in media communications to bring community stories to life as Communications Officer.



## DIANE GSELL

Diane Gsell is a Monterey-based food stylist and lifestyle writer. Dartmouth College taught her how to write, and her mother and the culinarily-gifted Golden State taught her how to cook.



## BILL HASTIE

Bill is the managing partner of Hastie Financial Group, a registered investment advisory firm. He earned a B.S in Economics from Cal Poly, an M.B.A. in Financial Planning from Golden Gate University, holds CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™ (CFP®) certification, and Certified Investment Management Analyst® (CIMA®) and Accredited Investment Fiduciary Analyst® (AIFA®) designations.



## MAC MCDONALD

Mac McDonald was a reporter, columnist and editor of the GO! weekly entertainment and dining section for the Monterey County Herald for 22 years. He was also Managing Editor of the Carmel Pine Cone for seven years. He is currently a freelance writer and editor writing about virtually every subject under the sun, from music, art, food and sports to marketing and public relations.



## SUZANNE SAUNDERS SHAW

Suzanne Saunders Shaw is an award-winning news broadcaster, a university lecturer in multi-media journalism and a contributor to websites and magazines. She anchored live TV news at both ABC and NBC in San Francisco for 25 years. Her career began at KSBW-TV in Salinas.



## LISA BRANCO

Lisa Branco currently serves as General Manager of Radicle Seed Company and Headstart Nursery. With over 25 years of experience in agriculture, Lisa is a dedicated advocate for mentoring the next generation of industry leaders. She serves on the boards of Monterey County Ag Education, the California Seed Association, and the UC Davis Seed Biotechnology Center. Lisa is also involved with the American Seed Trade Association as well as Hartnell's STEM Task Force. She resides in Salinas with her husband, Corey, and their children, Andrew and Lauren.



**MINDY CARPENTER**

Mindy Carpenter is a Partner and Vice President of Finance at Axis Ag. Before joining Axis, Mindy made her mark at FarmWise, starting in 2020 during the company's early expansion into the Salinas Valley. A proud third-generation member of a Salinas Valley farming family, Mindy's roots in agriculture run deep. Recognized by Women in Ag and AgKnowledge, Mindy is a passionate advocate for diversity and inclusion within the industry. She actively mentors and empowers the next generation of women leaders to pursue careers in a field that has traditionally lacked female representation. She lives with her husband Chris in Salinas.



**SCOTT DELUCCHI**

Scott, a San Francisco Bay Area native, joined the SPCA Monterey County as President & CEO in 2016, following 17 years with a Bay Area animal welfare organization and an earlier career as a high school teacher and administrator. He earned a B.A. in Communication from Stanford University, where he also played (sparingly!) on two national champion baseball teams. Scott and his wife Jay (a former chef who loves living in the Salad Bowl) keep busy with two active teens and two dogs -- one active, one couch potato.



**MIKE HALE**

Salinas native Mike Hale is a freelance writer who spent a long career in local journalism, working in various stints as both an editor and writer with the Salinas Californian, Santa Cruz Sentinel and the Monterey Herald. In 2014 he helped jumpstart KRML radio (94.7 FM) in Carmel, creating community-based programming for the "Locals Station for the Monterey Bay." He is now semi-retired, enjoying traveling abroad and discovering new adventures along the way.



**PATRICK TREGENZA**

Oh Salinas. It's given us Steinbeck, salad, Rodeo pronounced right, and, well, Patrick Tregenza. Having found out early on that jazz drumming may not be the most secure way to make a living he shifted his focus to commercial photography. His bread-and-butter jobs are sometimes literally bread and butter (or meat and potatoes) but are most often foods we were told to eat as kids. Salinas is still the lettuce center of the universe as it has been since Cal and Aron fought for their father's good graces and Patrick still does his best to entice us all to eat healthier.



**ABBY TAYLOR-SILVA**

Abby Taylor-Silva is Kahn, Soares & Conway, LLP's Managing Director of Regulatory Affairs, based in the firm's Salinas office. Kahn, Soares & Conway, LLP is a full-service law and lobbying firm that has engaged in legal representation and governmental advocacy for over 40 years. The firm has offices in Hanford, Sacramento and Salinas, California and represents clients both statewide and nationally, litigating in state and federal courts and appearing before the California Legislature and various state and federal agencies.



**GWEN MCGILL**

Gwen McGill is the founder GEM Collective, a marketing, events and public relations collective founded in 2013 focused on wine, food, events and hospitality. In 2017, she became Executive Director of the Santa Lucia Highlands Wine Artisans, a non-profit trade association dedicated to raising awareness and promoting the growers and vintners of Monterey County's Santa Lucia Highlands appellation.

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**CANDACE VILLARTA**

Candace Villarta, M.I.S., serves as the Communications & Development Manager for Monterey Bay Charter School. Born and raised on the Monterey Peninsula, she brings both professional expertise and deep personal commitment to her work. As the mother of four children who have attended Monterey Bay Charter School, Candace is a strong advocate for the school's Waldorf-inspired philosophy and its emphasis on educating the whole child. She works closely with the Monterey Bay Charter School Foundation Board to secure grant funding that sustains and expands the school's innovative academic, garden-based, and environmental programs. She can be reached at [communications@mbcharterschool.org](mailto:communications@mbcharterschool.org).



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# Riding the Wave

## Uncertainty, Policy, and the Future of Agriculture

By Lisa Branco



The agriculture industry has always been cyclical. Those of us who have spent our careers in this space understand that we experience extremely high highs and very low lows, and that the pendulum inevitably swings back. What feels different today is not the cycle itself, but the level of uncertainty we are navigating, and how long it has lingered.

From my vantage point on California's Central Coast, particularly in the Salinas Valley, it's clear that our industry has not fully rebounded to pre-pandemic norms. While schools, food service, and much of the economy have reopened, planted acreage remains down, production timing across the supply chain feels misaligned, and growers, ag companies, and downstream partners

alike are hesitant to make long-term commitments. That hesitation has created a domino effect that reaches far beyond our region and, in many cases, across the globe.

### Consolidation, Acreage Shifts, and Regional Change

One of the most visible changes has been ongoing consolidation across agriculture. As margins tighten and risk increases, fewer operations are managing more acreage, while others scale back or exit altogether. At the same time, acreage continues to shift as growers and companies look for ways to manage costs, labor availability, and regulatory pressure.

California, and especially regions like Salinas, remains a cornerstone of the United

States vegetable production, supplying a significant share of the nation's leafy greens and fresh-market vegetables. Yet it is also becoming increasingly difficult to do business here. Rising land values, regulatory complexity, water constraints, and labor challenges are pushing some production to other regions, both domestically and internationally. While diversification can be a smart risk-management strategy, the pace of these shifts should give the industry pause.

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*“Updated federal dietary guidelines place a stronger emphasis on fruit and vegetable consumption as a cornerstone of public health.”*

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### Labor, Inputs, and the Cost of Production

Labor remains one of the most pressing challenges for Central Coast agriculture. Minimum wage increases, ongoing labor shortages, and compliance requirements have significantly raised the cost of doing business. These pressures are compounded by higher input costs across the board, including seed, fertilizer, crop protection, energy, transportation, and packaging.

Water adds another layer of uncertainty. Drought cycles, groundwater regulations, and competition for limited resources continue to affect planning and investment decisions. Together, labor, water, and input pressures make long-term planning difficult and reinforce the cautious mindset seen throughout the produce supply chain.

### Policy, Nutrition, and the Demand Side of the Equation

While much of the agricultural conversation focuses on production challenges, important developments are emerging on the demand side. Updated federal dietary guidelines place a stronger emphasis on fruit and vegetable consumption as a cornerstone of public health. At the same time, food assistance policy is evolving to better reflect those recommendations.

Several states have begun restricting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for sugary beverages and certain snack foods, with growing attention on the use of SNAP dollars at fast-food establishments. Equally important, many states, including California, have expanded incentive programs that stretch SNAP dollars when recipients purchase fruits and vegetables. These programs have been shown to increase fresh produce consumption while supporting healthier diets.

For growers on the Central Coast, these shifts matter. Policies that encourage fruit and vegetable consumption have the potential to support more stable, long-term demand for the crops we grow. While they will not solve today's challenges overnight,

they represent an important signal that public policy and agricultural production may be moving in a more aligned direction.

### Economic Pressure and Consumer Behavior

The broader economy continues to influence consumer choices. Inflation and changing spending habits have affected fresh produce purchases, as well as discretionary categories such as ornamentals and fresh-market flowers. With population growth continuing while production acreage remains flat or declining, this imbalance is not sustainable over the long term.

Across the supply chain – from growers and packers to shippers and retailers – many are responding cautiously. Commitments are shorter, planning horizons are tighter, and decisions are increasingly made season by season rather than with long-term confidence.

### Choosing Perspective and the Long View

Despite these challenges, optimism remains. Agriculture has always adapted through periods of disruption, and this moment is no different. While the uncertainty feels unprecedented, history tells us that peri-

ods of realignment are often followed by renewed opportunity.

Moving forward will require clearer communication, stronger alignment, and collaboration across the industry, from growers and ag businesses to policymakers and consumers. Shared understanding of demand, risk, and long-term goals will be essential. One thing remains constant: agriculture feeds the world. Increasingly, it is also being asked to feed it better. The challenges are real, but so is the opportunity. If we stay engaged, flexible, and committed to the long view, agriculture will not only weather this period of uncertainty, but it will also help define what comes next. ☞



# From the Vegas Strip to the Salinas Valley

## *How AI Is Changing Everything*

By Mindy Carpenter



A quick trip to Las Vegas this week was refreshing and eye-opening - not just for the lights, but for how quickly everything changes. We were there three years ago for Spring Break and stayed in a hotel sitting one driveway back from the strip. The strip facing businesses in front of our hotel were run down, but the hotel was great.

This week, during our walk down the strip, we couldn't find the area where we had previously stayed. After crossing the street and gaining a little elevation, there it was. The hotel was now completely blocked by a three-story shopping complex. This wasn't something still under construction, but a fully functioning, beautifully modern building with vivid digital displays wrapped from corner to corner. I shouldn't have been as shocked as I was, considering how much else had changed. Life in Las Vegas moves quickly, fueled by Artificial Intelligence (AI).

As we walked through the many shopping malls, we found a completely robotic

bar. You place your order on a screen, and two human-free robots make and mix your drink. They twisted seamlessly from one side of the bar to the next, making very little sound. While we didn't order anything, we were perfectly entertained simply watching technology.

Later in the day, we took a ride in Amazon's contribution to driverless cars, the Zoox. The vehicles are all over the strip, and are accessed via their app. Once you request your car, you can follow their location right to the tips of your shoes. Opening and closing the doors are done from the app, and once inside, you are greeted with four small digital screens with your name and destination. You can program your choice of music and the temperature, then sit back and relax. The vehicles are very new and rides were free, so why not! It was strange to look ahead and not see a driver. It used blinkers, and changed lanes just like a normal driver would. AI is now driving.

At the conclusion of our three days in Sin

City, I wondered how many other things around us were controlled by AI. For sure my new best friend, the Sphere, had AI internally. I sat in a comfy chair in our hotel room and watched this amazing creation every night until the wee hours of the morning. It didn't take my money like the slot machines did, it didn't bump into me like so many people on the strip, and it didn't cause anxiety as the hustle and bustle of the area did. It was peaceful and entertaining. While we did not venture inside, I was purely fascinated by the outer shell, or Exosphere, which was one giant, round video screen. How did it work? Artificial Intelligence! Artists use AI to create images such as landscapes, giant eyeballs, outer space, and even dancing cats to display on the Sphere. Advertisements for events are on a schedule, though the images are not. Rather, they are selected randomly by an algorithm, another form of AI. This AI provides my free, nightly entertainment. This is Las Vegas where everything is quick, anything is possible, and interestingly enough, it all works!

That same realization followed me home, where I began noticing how often AI shows up in everyday life — even when we don't realize it. So much of what we see and enjoy is created by AI. It is so interesting, yet a bit frightening at the same time. I like to scroll through Instagram to pass the time, and I stumbled upon a cockatoo that was incredibly entertaining. His owner shared videos of him dancing to music on TV, as well as hilarious clips from night cameras of him asking Alexa to play music while she was sleeping. I enjoyed this bird for over a month before I decided to research him. What did I find? Neither the bird nor its owner was real. I was so disappointed.

I hesitantly researched other things that now seemed too good to be true and found the same results. Being a huge animal lover, I started to feel foolish at all of the things I

loved that were created by a computer. Now more than ever, I am learning we need to research before becoming fully invested. Sure, a dancing bird is entertaining and harmless - but what will they think of next?

### AI and Ag

The world of agriculture technology is no different than the world of Instagram and the Vegas Strip. You blink and there's a new machine promising amazing results. With the speed of AI and AgTech, growers have adapted the ideology I did when using Instagram—research before becoming fully invested. Most of the technology inventors are startups that have one thing in common, sell as many as possible as quickly as possible. The companies are likely backed by investors, mainly Venture Capitalists, who want the quickest and greatest return on their investment. What does this mean? The startups receive funding from one or sometimes multiple rounds of fundraising, which allows them to create a prototype that becomes a marketable product. The timeline from prototype to market is defined by how much cash is available. Employees, parts,

software, rent, taxes, employee incentives all eat away at the bank balance. Research and development are costly!

When a prototype is introduced, the hope is that growers will observe what the new technology can do, consider how it might fit into their operations, and place an order. This gets the production ball rolling, and because startups often operate on a short runway of funds, iterations must happen quickly—and the product must work effectively as soon as it hits the field. As we've seen in the Salinas Valley, when the machines hit the dirt, the conversations begin.

---

*“So much of what we see and enjoy is created by AI. It is so interesting, yet a bit frightening at the same time.”*

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One of the main complaints growers have for their operations is the cost of labor. Business in California is already costly, but labor is outrageous. Everything from wages and living expenses, to taxes and insurance is sky high. This known fact is what brings startups and their technology here with the motivation of helping growers.

What technology has made its way to our valley? One of the leaders in this category is weeding robots. Weeding is a very manual job completed by hand crews. Crews range in size anywhere from 10 to 20 people, depending upon the block size and commodity they are working. A hand crew can complete a weedy field at the approximate speed of an acre per hour. For purposes of example only, if one worker earns a minimum of \$16.90 per hour, a crew of 20 would cost the grower \$338 per hour. Keep in mind, this does not include taxes and insurance. For growers with hundreds of acres, this cost quickly climbs.

What are the growers looking for? Machines that are not only efficient and reliable but also cost effective. This sounds like an easy fix with a robot, but unfortunately, that is not always the case. Robots are complex machines, and parts

and repairs are costly. When a machine goes down, hand crews are immediately sent in its place, meaning growers often pay for equipment, repairs, and labor at the same time. In agriculture, there is no waiting for repairs, timing is everything.

Multiple downtime delays with machines are a negative and can create a ripple effect among other growers. Word travels quickly in this Valley, and negative experiences with new technology become a common point of contention.

What we have learned in this new revolution of technology is that perfection takes time. The AI that allows robots to take images of fields and identify a crop from a weed wasn't created overnight, or even in a month. It takes constant testing in a lab, acres in fields, hours of annotating images. Not only does the AI and software need to be flawless, but the hardware, hydraulics, frame and everything else that fabricators and engineers create to give the robot shape must work in harmony. Moreover, the machines must be affordable.

### Ag Tech in Action

So, what works and what doesn't work in AgTech? Now that we have been almost 10 years into this AgTech market, we have learned that price, reliability, and customer support are key factors. Companies exploding into the Valley with innovative technology must come prepared with data, customer testimonies, and open ears to listen to suggestions. Much of this new tech requires a subscription service, and it is not cheap. Replacement parts are not cheap, and broken technology costs double.

Growers are becoming more open to technology, and while still hesitant, are finding robots that really do work. In an ideal world, new technology should integrate with existing machines, eliminating the need for constant replacement and costly purchases. AgTech is all about saving growers time and money with AI, and it is finally beginning to make this happen. AI may not be as flashy as the Vegas Strip, but in the Salinas Valley, it's quietly learning how to earn growers' trust—and that's where real, lasting change happens. ☞



# Conservative Investing in a Falling Interest Rate Environment

By Bill Hastie



One of the most significant challenges facing investors is changing economic conditions that can affect different investors in different ways. This was never more evident than in 2022 when rapidly accelerating inflation forced the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), the policymaking body of the Federal Reserve, to raise interest rates seven times, which was more than ever before in a one-year period. This action by the FOMC was taken to curb 41-year high inflation in June 2022 of 9.1 percent. By the end of 2022, the FOMC had increased the federal funds rate (a very short-term interest rate) by 4.25 percent. To some investors, this came as very good news, and disastrous news to others.

## Treasury's Yield Curve

As a result of the rapidly rising federal funds rate, the Treasury yield curve inverted in July 2022 – which means that the yield on the 2-year Treasury Bill exceeded the yield of the 10-year Treasury. While an inverted Treasury yield curve is often considered a predictor of a potential economic downturn to come, it produced an interest rate environment that substantially benefited conser-

vative investors. Since an inverted Treasury yield curve provides the highest yields at the shortest end of curve, conservative investors could earn in excess of 5 percent from 3- and 6-month Treasuries for quite some time. What's more, short-term Treasuries are considered the risk-free asset since both principal and interest/yield is guaranteed by the U.S. government. For many, it seemed like the perfect, conservative investment.

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*“As interest rates fall, it may be beneficial to lock in current yields with longer-term CDs or Treasuries.”*

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As noted, this lasted for quite some time. But in September 2024, the Federal Reserve policy pivoted and cut interest rates by 0.5 percent (or 50 basis points). Two more rate cuts followed later that year in November and December, which is when the Treasury yield curve began to normalize, meaning that longer-term rates began to exceed short-term rates. As a result, Treasury yields

began to decline from over 5 percent to around 3.6 percent as of early February 2026, and the previously “perfect investment” began to lose its luster.

So, what does the conservative investor do when Treasury (and certificates of deposit) yields drop to a level that is no longer attractive? Let's look at some areas of the investment markets that typically benefit from declining interest rates.

## Bonds

Bond prices and interest rates have an inverse relationship, so as interest rates fall, bond prices rise. When interest rates are falling, bonds with longer duration tend to do better. Duration measures a bond's sensitivity to changing interest rates – the longer the duration, the more a bond's price will react to changing rates. High yield (non-investment grade) may also become appealing for investors seeking higher returns.

## CDs and Treasury Bills

As interest rates fall, it may be beneficial to lock in current yields with longer-term CDs or Treasuries. This will protect cash from falling yields in the future.

## Growth Stocks

While growth stocks are typically not considered a conservative investment, lower borrowing costs can help improve a company's profitability and its stock price. Also, technology stocks, for example, are valued at the present value of their expected future earnings. Lower interest rates, referred to here as the discount rate, will equate to a higher present value of the stock.

## Dividend-Paying Stocks

These stocks are typically considered a lower-risk stock category. Companies with a consistent track record of paying dividends

may become more attractive as a source of income. This benefit may also be compounded by improving stock prices.

### Cyclical Stocks

These stocks tend to perform better as the economy responds to lower interest rates. These asset categories include consumer discretionary, financials, and industrials, and are often found in value mutual funds or exchange traded funds (ETFs).

### Real Assets

Changing economic conditions can often create uncertainty. Commodities such as gold and silver can act as a hedge against this uncertainty and have produced very impressive returns over the last two years. Metals can be owned in physical form, but can be a challenge with transporting, storage, and insuring. There are mutual funds and ETFs that provide for much easier ownership free of the challenges noted above.

Changing economic conditions often create challenges for investors but may also create attractive opportunities. While always keeping in mind the investor's risk tolerance, pursuing investments that tend to perform better in the expected future economic environment may help the investor maintain the rates of return they may need for maintaining, for example, retirement income. Regular monitoring and occasional portfolio rebalancing may also help in achieving desired outcomes. ❧



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# Rooted in Learning

## *How Monterey Bay Charter School Cultivates the Whole Child Through Nature, Community, and Purpose*

By Candace Villarta



**O**n California's Central Coast, where agriculture, ocean, and community are deeply intertwined, Monterey Bay Charter School (MBCS) offers a model of public education that is firmly rooted in the land. For over 25 years, MBCS has been Monterey County's only tuition-free, public Waldorf-inspired school, serving nearly 500 students from transitional kindergarten through eighth grade. Founded in 1998 and authorized by the Monterey County Office of Education, the school enrolls families from across Monterey and adjacent counties who are seeking an education that nurtures curiosity, responsibility, and connection to the natural world.

Guided by the core principles for Public Waldorf Education, accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), and a member of the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education, MBCS meets California's rigorous state academic

standards through a curriculum rich in the arts, storytelling, music, movement, and experiential learning. The result is a learning environment that supports intellectual growth while honoring social-emotional development and a child's innate sense of wonder.

"When I look at the depth and breadth of what our students get to experience during their time here, it's just so impressive," says Jessica Guzzi, Executive Director of Monterey Bay Charter School. "They're receiving a rigorous academic education in a way that meets them where they are and builds their strengths." This approach resonates with families across the region; for the fifth consecutive year, MBCS was voted Family Favorite Charter School in Monterey County by Monterey Parent magazine readers.

### **Classrooms Designed to Invite Learning**

At MBCS, classrooms are intentionally designed to draw students into the learning

process. Lessons are interactive, imaginative, and student-driven, encouraging learners to take ownership of their education.

"We invite our students into the lesson," explains teacher Natalie Croft. "If they don't actually touch it and drive that lesson with me, it doesn't live in them."

A cornerstone of this approach is the use of main lesson books. Rather than relying solely on textbooks, students create their own academic records, out of blank art books, by synthesizing what they learn through writing and illustration. Over time, these books become both scholarly artifacts and personal time capsules.

"Those blank pages become a time capsule," Croft says. "They have to illustrate their own page and apply what they've learned." This practice strengthens academic skills while cultivating creativity and deep recall. "My students have become exceptional writers because they write with every lesson," she adds, "they have to remember what they've seen or felt in order to illustrate the page."

### **Learning Rooted in the Garden**

Few places embody the school's philosophy more clearly than in its gardens. At the Foothill campus, a community-created garden was built last year through a collaborative effort involving students, teachers, families, and volunteers. The space fosters shared responsibility and hands-on learning, while enhancing biodiversity through pollinator plant kits gifted by the Xerces Society.

At the Pacific Grove campus, the garden is generously sponsored by Taylor Farms, with Hana Gardens donating soil and plants throughout the year. Third-grade students play a central role in caring for the garden, along with the bunnies and

chickens that call it home.

The garden program is deeply integrated into the third-grade curriculum, a pivotal year in child development often referred to in Waldorf education as the “nine-year change.” During this stage, children begin to see the world with new independence and curiosity. Working in the garden—planting seeds, amending soil, harvesting crops, and even contending with gophers—allows students to experience the rhythms and realities of agriculture firsthand.

Cooking is woven into the curriculum as students prepare meals using their harvested produce, and record recipes in their main lesson books. The process offers profound satisfaction and understanding. By planting, tending, harvesting, and cooking, children gain a tangible sense of how human effort and natural systems are interconnected.

The school firmly believes in the benefits of working in a garden. Time outdoors improves health, supports physical and emotional development, and allows children to learn by observing, exploring, and interacting with natural elements. Success is measured by how often the garden is used as a living classroom.

### Environmental Stewardship in Action

MBCS’s commitment to sustainability extends well beyond the garden fence. The school is proudly celebrating its tenth consecutive year as a NOAA Ocean Guardian School, a distinction that makes MBCS the only school on the Central Coast to achieve this milestone and just the second school in the nation to receive this honor.



To commemorate this special achievement, Congressman Jimmy Panetta presented MBCS students with a Congressional Award in October, recognizing ten years of success as a NOAA Ocean Guardian School.

In partnership with Waste Management and ReGen Monterey, MBCS has taken major steps toward becoming a zero-waste school. Outdoor waste stations now feature bins for compost, recycling, and trash, while every classroom has a food waste container. Annual school activities include Earth Day celebrations, virtual NOAA snapshot

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*“Few places embody the school’s philosophy more clearly than in its gardens.”*

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meetings, environmental education videos, and ongoing efforts to combat marine debris. For the second year in a row, the school has adopted Casa Verde Beach through the California Coastal Commission’s Adopt-A-Beach program. Quarterly beach cleanups organized by MBCS families have removed hundreds of pounds of trash from the shoreline, reinforcing the school’s belief that stewardship is a shared responsibility.

### Classrooms Without Walls

Experiential learning is a hallmark of the MBCS program, and field trips are designed as extensions of the curriculum rather than add-ons. Third graders expand their agricultural studies with visits to Honey Blossom Farms in Carmel Valley. Fourth graders bring California history to life in Gold Country. Fifth graders practice ancient Greek sports at a Pentathlon in Northern California, while sixth graders explore geology at Lassen National Park. Seventh graders study astronomy under the skies of Yosemite, and eighth graders complete their journey with a backpacking expedition in Point Reyes.

These overnight trips serve as meaningful rites of passage, fostering resilience, collaboration, and a deeper connection to both peers and place.



### Support Monterey Bay Charter School

Monterey Bay Charter School gladly accepts donations to support its academic, garden-based, and environmental programs. Community contributions play a vital role in sustaining hands-on learning experiences that connect students to the land, their food systems, and environmental stewardship. Donations can be made online at [www.mbayschool.org](http://www.mbayschool.org).

“This education is based on a really coherent picture of the human being—a holistic picture,” says Liz Beaven, Executive Director of the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education. “We try to educate the whole child and support capacity building so their gifts can really be available to them.”

### Looking Ahead

Monterey Bay Charter School’s long-term vision includes building a unified campus. A capital campaign to raise funds for a new school is underway. Reuniting its campuses would provide a more central location and expand access for families throughout the region.

As MBCS looks to the future, its mission remains clear: to provide robust academics and enriching, land-based experiences that cultivate lifelong learners—students who are curious, capable, and prepared to share their talents with the world.

The lottery application for the 2026–2027 school year is now open. School tours are available, and interested families can apply at [www.mbayschool.org](http://www.mbayschool.org). ☞

# Read to Me Project Literacy Program Making Great Strides

By Mac McDonald



It's said that literacy begins at birth and the family is the baby's first teacher. It's also known that 85 percent of brain development occurs from birth to age five, when the building blocks of a child's language and vocabulary skills have formed a firm foundation for literacy and success in school.

Which makes the goals of the Read to Me Project (RtMP) literacy program brilliant in its concept and so effective in its implementation.

## How it Works

The original concept is surprisingly simple: to have older siblings read to their younger, pre-kindergarten brothers and sisters in no or low-literacy homes. That blueprint was so successful the program expanded its reach to include all students, not just those with younger siblings at home, as well as involving parents in the process through orientations and workshops.

The Project launched in 2011 in four classrooms in Monterey County with 50 students reading to 60 of their younger brothers

and sisters. So far, more than 25,000 students and children ages six months to five years have been involved in the program. Now there are 107 classrooms in eight school districts in Monterey County involved in the project, according to Executive Director Jason Little, in collaboration with the Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE) and its superintendent.

"With Read to Me Project, you are never alone in the literacy journey," says MCOE Superintendent Dr. Deneen Guss. "Especially in the wake of the pandemic, RtMP's early literacy model understands that literacy is not just a skill, but a catalyst for hope, belonging, and stronger communities. We are proud to partner with RtMP to ensure academic success for all students."

## Little Says he Expects the Program to Progress and Expand in the Coming Years

"One of the most exciting ways the program has grown is through the expansion of our Reading Buddies model. While it began with students reading to younger siblings, we

quickly saw that many more students wanted to participate," he says. "We intentionally opened the model so all participating students can step into a leadership role by reading to a younger child. That scalability matters as it allows schools to build a culture where students support one another, and where leadership and responsibility are practiced early and often."

## While Literacy is the Mission, the Benefits Go Beyond School

"This approach strengthens early literacy while also building skills that matter far beyond school. When older students show up consistently for younger children, they are learning responsibility, communication, and how to connect," he says. "Those are the same qualities that sustain communities across generations. By making the model flexible and inclusive, we are creating something schools can grow with. A program that supports early readers today while preparing future leaders for tomorrow."

Little has been executive director for two years and comes with an extensive background in education (he has six degrees, including master's degrees in Public Administration and International Education Management). While much of his career has been in environmental education, and not specifically in literacy, once on board he not only fully embraced his mission but felt his skill set was well aligned with the aims of Read to Me Project. Now he's seeing the organization making significant progress in just the two years he's been at the helm.

"Over the past two years, the most meaningful progress we've made has been around equity. By removing cost barriers for schools, we opened the door for many more classrooms and communities to participate, particularly those serving students with the greatest need," says Little. "That decision changed everything. As access expanded,

trust grew, participation increased, and the program scaled more quickly and more intentionally than ever before. Because of that trust, the program has grown beyond a single model into a broader ecosystem of literacy support.”

Founded in 2011 by Barbara Greenway, a public-school speech and language specialist, the Read to Me Project started with Greenway having an epiphany one morning.

Greenway says she got alarming calls from kindergarten teachers that their young students lacked important basic knowledge in reading, language, and cognitive skills. The children simply weren't ready for kindergarten and were often as much as two years behind in language and cognitive skills. These students were not “disabled” or otherwise impaired, they simply did not have the stimulation or motivation at home during the first few years of life, a critical period for brain development.

Greenway realized a new direction was needed and she came up with a simple idea: enabling upper elementary students to read to their infant, toddler, and preschool-age siblings at home, even those whose language skills had not yet developed. Simply reading out loud to them.

“The Project has trained and inspired thousands of students to read to young family members,” Greenway says. “Book-by-book, day-by-day, we hear that young siblings are using new words learned and

are waiting at the front door for their older brothers or sisters to come home from school with another new story to be read out loud to them. Students tell us that they love reading stories, spending time with their young siblings and are becoming better readers.”

### By the Numbers

Before delving into data about how the Read to Me Project has moved the needle in Monterey County schools and communities, there is some eye-opening data about the “literacy lag” in the county:

- Salinas Valley hospitals report 5,000 annual births. Currently 75% of Monterey County children start school behind — most never catch up.
- The literacy lag has been exacerbated by COVID-related learning interruptions.
- 49% of Monterey County families do not read to their children.
- 45% of Monterey County parents have less than a high school education and first-generation immigrants often have less than a 6th grade education.
- Fewer than 25% of Monterey County families are accessing preschool programs and licensed day-care.

That's a daunting set of figures, but RtMP can back up its efforts with formal and reliable assessments for teachers, such as the Desired Results Developmental Profile

(DRDP), which shows in 2020-2021, that three and four year-olds in the Greenfield Union School District, RtMP participant scores were 2 percent to 8 percent higher compared to non-participating children of the same age.

RtMP participant scores were greater on Language and Literacy Development regarding Communication and Use of Language (Expressive), Reciprocal Communication and Conversation, and Emergent Writing. They also scored higher on Social and Emotional Developments and Cognition, including early math and science.

And, in 2019, a third-party program evaluation showed RtMP student participants had higher standard assessment scores than students who did not participate in the program. That's a significant finding and shows how effective RtMP can be. With COVID's years of disruption of educational systems having caused further declines in student academics and social and emotional behavior, the simple act of reading promoted by RtMP may be needed more than ever.

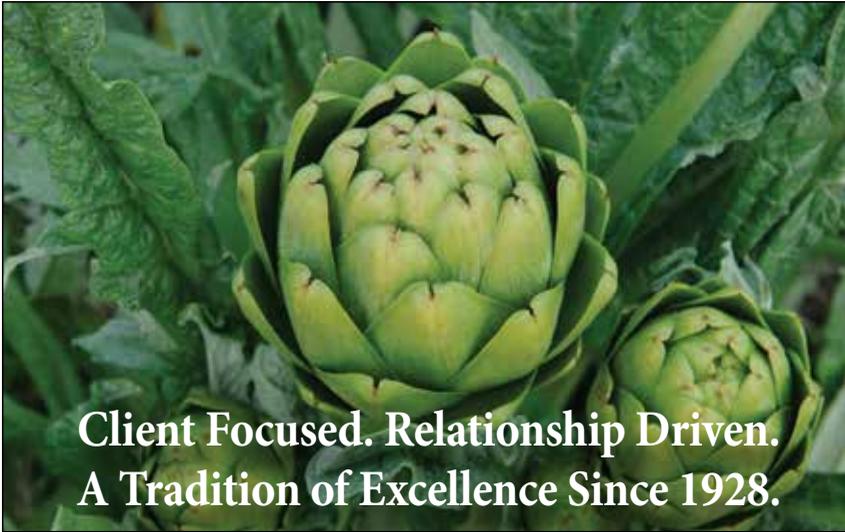
### Impact Beyond Kids

The success of the program doesn't just impact the students and younger children at home, but the entire family, including parents and caregivers. Nurturing and encouraging reading in the family helps to break the generational cycle of low-literacy among underserved families in our communities. RtMP provides parents and caregivers with information about early brain development and practical ideas to nourish language through simple, daily activities.

“While our classroom-based work remains the core, we are now able to introduce new programming that complements and strengthens it, such as parent/caregiver workshops, and after-school programming, which deepens impact while creating opportunities for new partnerships and revenue,” says Little, who adds he's assisted by a vibrant staff who are excited for their work. “This growth allows us to reach more children, engage families in new ways, and work alongside community partners who share a commitment to long-term literacy and leadership development.”

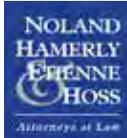
One of the aspects of the program that has expanded is involving parents and caretakers





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in the program. The demand has been mostly driven by parents and caregivers themselves inquiring how they can get involved in their children's literacy journey.

"The parent and caregiver workshops happen throughout the year with various workshops and community partners. We are currently working with Sherwood Elementary (Salinas City Unified School District) on a four-week series that started in mid-January — with over 30 caregivers in attendance," he says. "In the past year we have partnered with numerous local organizations to reach more than 1,000 parents and look to double our efforts as we continue to develop stronger programming that honors the time taken by parents and caregivers to invest into literacy in their homes. These sessions are designed to meet real families where they are, offering clear, evidence-based strategies they can use right away at home. The momentum we're seeing tells us this work is resonating, and it's helping build a stronger foundation for learning that stretches well beyond the classroom."

**Future is Bright**

Little is excited about the future of the program, with more expansion and added programs and outreach.

"Looking ahead, our focus is on scaling thoughtfully. That means expanding into more schools and districts, continuing to innovate in response to community needs, and ensuring the organization is strong enough to sustain this work well into the future," he says. "The progress we've seen so far shows that when access, trust, and quality come together, the impact can grow in ways that truly serve the entire community. Caring isn't taught, it's caught — and that is our goal — for kids and families to catch the joy of reading aloud, because when reading becomes fun, we do it again and again, which can build the kind of confidence that can transform someone's life!" ☞

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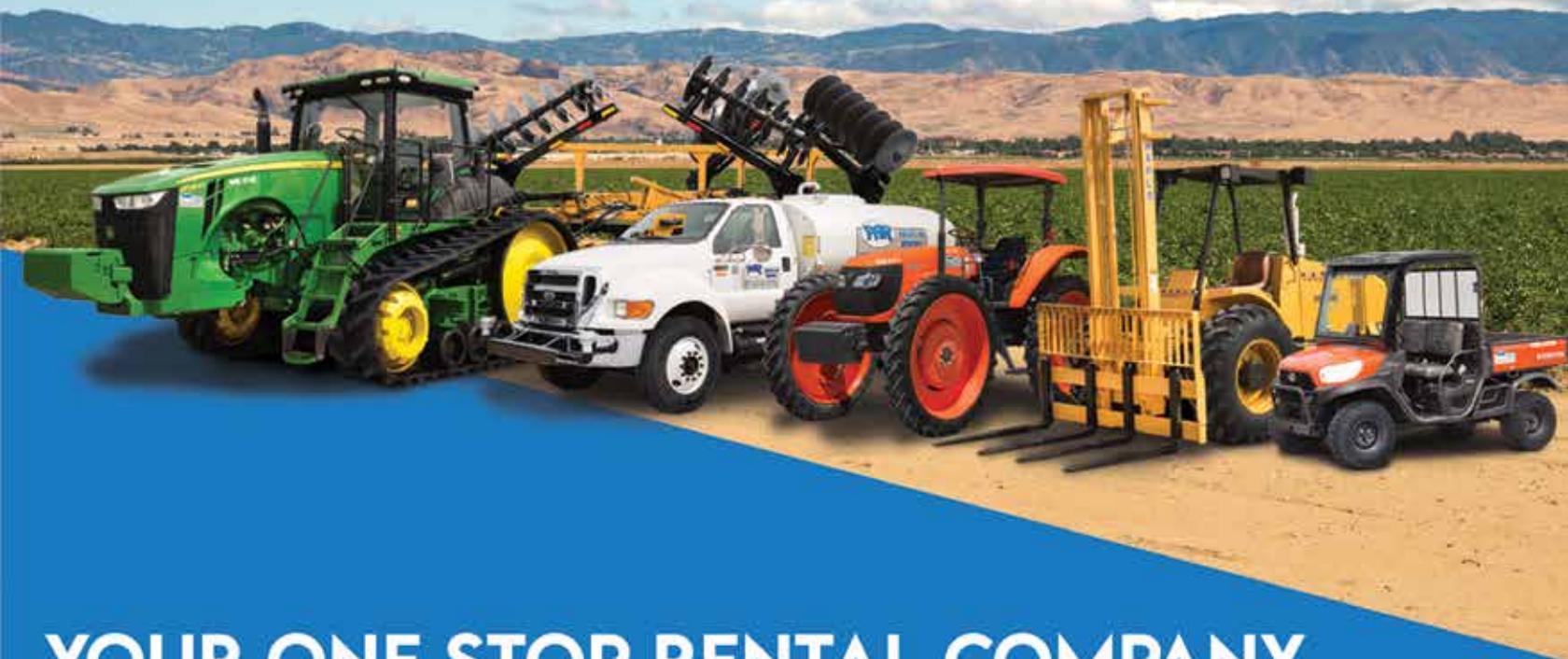
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# One Hump or Two?

## *Navigating Animal Rescue During Disasters*

By Scott Delucchi | Photos Courtesy of Monterey County SPCA

When I accepted the role of CEO at SPCA Monterey County 10 years ago, I envisioned a quiet “honeymoon” period. I timed my start date for the carefree days of summer, giving my family time to settle into the rhythm of our new community. Instead of a honeymoon, I got the Soberanes Fire.

Before I even knew my way around the SPCA’s labyrinthine corners, the blaze erupted, then ripped straight into October, becoming the most expensive wildfire to fight in United States history. As the county’s first responder for animals, we witnessed heartache and devastation and acted instantly. I called local groups Animal Friends Rescue Project and Peace of Mind Dog Rescue and former colleagues in the Bay Area. Within 48 hours, we secured landing spots for every adoptable animal in our care to make room for a flood of displaced evacuees.

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*“While things eventually calmed, our vigilance didn’t.”*

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At one point, we were caring for more than 300 evacuated animals. I didn’t even know all my employees’ names yet, but we were already in the trenches together. That experience taught me early on that this community is uniquely resilient, and that we see the best in our staff and volunteers when the situation is toughest.

While things eventually calmed, our vigilance didn’t. Each season brought tests. Dangerous debris flows, a horse stuck in a swimming pool on Thanksgiving Day, deer entangled in fencing, and emergency boarding of loved pets for hospitalized owners.

Four years after the Soberanes Fire, we faced a doomsday scenario. In the midst of



*SPCA’s temporary shelter at the Monterey County Fairgrounds.*

a global pandemic, Monterey County wasn’t hit by one fire, but three: The River, Carmel, and Dolan fires.

Navigating a disaster is hard enough; navigating one while social distancing is a logistical nightmare. While the world sanitized groceries and packages and stayed in “bubbles,” our masked staff worked overtime to the point of exhaustion. Yet, the

community met us halfway. Community members helped evacuate neighbors. A local McDonald’s owner began delivering McMuffins and hash browns in individually bagged portions to keep our staff safe and fed while avoiding shared food. Other random acts of kindness popped up like “we love firefighters” signs along our local Highway 68. When the River Fire triggered an evacuation



*Pet geese in their temporary, SPCA-managed County Fairgrounds shelter.*

warning for our own campus, we couldn't wait for the official order. We had hundreds of lives to move. As the smoke thickened, some of our own employees were evacuated from their homes; one would lose hers entirely.

The move to the Monterey County Fairgrounds was a blur of controlled chaos. A caravan of SPCA vehicles and volunteers shuttled dogs and cats across town, as smaller SPCA teams prepared two other off-site shelters for evacuated horses and livestock. In those long hours, the professionalism of our team shone through the smoke and fatigue. I remember walking past our Operations Director's door one early morning and hearing her ask into the phone with total sincerity: "Does your camel have one hump or two?" It wasn't curiosity; she knew two-humped camels were bigger and required more space.

At the Fairgrounds, we got creative. The storied venue where Jimi Hendrix famously lit his guitar on fire in 1967, saw its men's restroom repurposed to house a gaggle of pet geese. Since our staff and volunteers are predominantly female, the restroom became the most practical "pond" available, though it gave new meaning to "getting goosed" for our few men who needed to use the facilities. Nearby, we built a custom pen for 13 tortoises belonging to multiple displaced families. Even in a disaster, personality counts; within 24

hours, we modified the enclosure to separate a few tortoises for untoward advances on their new shelter mates.

Through it all, the SPCA didn't ask owners for a penny. During a disaster, the last thing a family should worry about is the cost of keeping their four-legged, winged or doubled-humped family members safe. Because federal reimbursement is a slow, bureaucratic maze, we shared our rescue work on social media and turned to our neighbors. The support poured in as quickly as the animals; donated pet food and supplies filled our lobby daily.

The years since brought more of the same. When the Pajaro levee broke, we were there, wading through streets and rescuing beloved pets. When atmospheric rivers turned fire-scorched hills into mud, we shifted our focus

from flames to floods, counting emergency cots and preparing our campus to serve as a makeshift barracks for staff members cut off from their homes. My family was among those ordered to evacuate. The Covid-era labeled animal welfare work as essential, confirming what we knew. Our work doesn't or can't stop.

To stay ready, we train year-round. We sent small teams to Malibu and Chico during their darkest hours, because it was the right thing to do and sharpened our skills. When the next siren sounds in Monterey County, we aren't practicing—we are performing. Ten years in, I'm still waiting for my honeymoon, but I've found something better: a community that looks out for its own. We don't just weather the storms; we hold the line until the sun comes back out. ☪



*SPCA staff rescued animals from flooded Pajaro homes.*

# Cultivating Confidence

*The Western Food Safety Conference Returns to Salinas*

By Mike Hale



In a region known as the “Salad Bowl of the World,” few topics matter more than food safety. From the agricultural fields stretching across the Salinas Valley to the global markets they supply, the responsibility of keeping fresh produce safe has never been more complex — or more critical. That responsibility takes center stage May 6–7 when the 21st annual Western Food Safety Conference returns to Sherwood Hall in Salinas, bringing together scientists, growers, regulators, and industry leaders for two days devoted to one shared mission: protecting the food supply.

Sponsored by the Hartnell College Foundation, the conference has become one of the premier educational gatherings on the West Coast. Holding the event in Salinas is no accident: Monterey County is responsible for growing nearly 70 percent of the nation’s lettuce, with the region playing a critical role in feeding the country.

Billed as “Advancing a Culture of Food Safety Excellence,” the conference reflects a forward-looking approach in an industry facing rapid technological change, evolving regulations, and rising consumer expecta-

tions. “Food safety is evolving quickly,” said Johnna Hepner, committee chair for the 2026 conference and Vice President of Business Development & Partnerships at Starfish. “New technologies, advancing science and changing regulations mean we can’t rely on what worked five or 10 years ago. Building a culture of growth and innovation helps us stay ahead — not just to meet requirements, but to strengthen how we protect our products, our people, and our consumers.”

## Where Science Meets the Field

For more than two decades, the Western Food Safety Conference has served as a vital bridge between research and real-world application. The event draws professionals from across the fresh produce supply chain — growers, shippers, processors, auditors, and regulators — who rely on up-to-date information to navigate an increasingly complicated landscape. Attendees can expect in-depth sessions on the latest produce safety research, regulatory developments, and emerging technologies. The conference is designed to be practical as well as

informative, offering strategies that can be implemented immediately in today’s working environments.

“Whether you’re a grower, processor, researcher or solution provider, the goal is to walk away with practical insights, renewed confidence, and a stronger sense of belonging to something bigger than any one operation,” said Hepner, who brings more than 30 years of experience in food safety and supply chain leadership, including holding influential positions at the former Produce Marketing Association, Markon Cooperative Inc., and iFDS. “The conversations that happen here — in the sessions, the hallways, and the networking moments — reinforce that we’re all working toward the same goal: protecting public health and strengthening our food system.”

## Powerhouse Voices in Food Safety

The 2026 conference features an exceptional lineup of keynote speakers whose careers have helped shape national food safety policy and practice. One of the featured presenters is Joseph W. Reardon, Senior Director of Food Safety Programs for the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA). Reardon brings decades of experience working at the intersection of state and federal food safety systems. Previously Assistant Commissioner for Consumer Protection for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, Reardon has also served in senior leadership roles at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, where he helped coordinate national efforts to strengthen the country’s food safety infrastructure. His work has ranged from emergency response and regulatory oversight to implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

A respected national voice, Reardon has testified before Congress on food defense and bioterrorism risks and has been honored

***“As the event’s long-time sponsor, the Hartnell College Foundation plays a pivotal role in bringing the conference to life.”***

with numerous awards, including NASDA’s prestigious James A. Graham Award and the Harvey W. Wiley Award from the Association of Food and Drug Officials. His keynote address will focus on the evolving relationship between federal and state agencies and the collaborative systems required to keep food safe in an increasingly interconnected marketplace.

Equally compelling is keynote speaker Dr. Darin Detwiler, widely regarded as one of the most influential voices in global food safety. A professor, author and founder of Detwiler Consulting Group, Dr. Detwiler has spent more than 30 years transforming personal tragedy and professional expertise into global advocacy. He has advised the FDA, USDA, CDC, and multinational food companies, helping shape policies that protect millions of consumers.

His keynote, titled “Leading a Culture of Food Safety Excellence Has No Expiration Date,” promises to be both provocative and inspiring. Drawing on decades of experience, Detwiler will challenge industry leaders to look beyond compliance and embrace true accountability.

**An Audience as Diverse as the Industry**

The Western Food Safety Conference is intentionally designed to welcome a broad cross-section of participants. Executive managers, food safety directors, quality assurance

supervisors, auditors, recall team members, and farm labor contractors all attend side by side. College students are also encouraged to participate, reflecting the conference’s commitment to cultivating the next generation of food safety professionals—a mission closely aligned with its sponsor.

“My hope is that every attendee leaves the conference feeling grounded, empowered, and supported,” Hepner said. “Feeding the world is an incredibly rewarding responsibility. This conference gives our food safety community the opportunity to come together, share ideas, learn from one another, and build meaningful connections.

**The Hartnell Connection**

As the event’s long-time sponsor, the Hartnell College Foundation plays a pivotal role in bringing the conference to life. Founded in 1979, the nonprofit organization supports the students, faculty, and programs of Hartnell College through scholarships, grants, and community partnerships. Hosting a major food safety conference in Salinas is a natural extension of that mission. Few regions in the world are as deeply con-

nected to agriculture as the Salinas Valley, and few industries are as essential to its economy.

**Building the Future of Food Safety**

More than just a professional development event, the Western Food Safety Conference has become an annual touchstone for an industry built on collaboration. Over two days of presentations, panel discussions, and networking opportunities, participants will explore topics ranging from microbial risk reduction and traceability technology to crisis communication and regulatory compliance.

**In the End, Food Safety is About Trust**

Consumers trust that the food on their plates is safe. Growers trust that science will guide them. Regulators trust that the industry will do the right thing. “Salinas has always been a leader in agriculture,” Hepner said. “By embracing science-based practices, data-driven decision-making, and proven preventive controls, our region can continue to lead in food safety — not just today, but well into the future.” ☞





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# California's Producer Responsibility Act for Packaging

*What's Coming and What You Need to Know*

By Abby Taylor-Silva



In 2022, Governor Newsom signed SB 54, establishing California's largest extended producer responsibility (EPR) program. The law shifts the financial burden for collecting, processing, and recycling packaging materials from local jurisdictions to producers. An estimated 13,615 producers of single-use packaging and plastic food service ware must now cover end-of-life disposal costs and ensure their products are recyclable or compostable by 2032.

California is one of seven states with EPR programs now in statute, with implementation dates varying from 2025 through 2032. This program will be administered by the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle). California's regulations for SB 54 are expected to be finalized in Spring 2026, followed by registration and data submission requirements for producers of single-use packaging, including food packaging and single-use food service ware.

This article covers essential definitions,

including who qualifies as a "producer," and the critical deadlines you'll need to meet once regulations take effect.

## Defining a Producer and Packaging

For packaging other than food service ware, a producer is a person who manufactures a good, provided that the person is in the state and either owns the designated brand or trademark used with the goods when they are first sold or distributed with packaging or is licensed to manufacture the goods. The licensee must have the legal right to use the brand or trademark on the goods in connection with manufacturing the goods and be entitled to be the only person with such rights in the state or in a subregion of the state. If no such person exists in-state, the producer is the owner of the designated brand or trademark in the state. If neither of these scenarios exist, then under certain conditions, the producer is the licensee of the designated brand or trademark. However, a person who produces, harvests,

and packages an agricultural commodity on the site where the agricultural commodity was grown or raised is not considered a producer.

Additionally, producers are only responsible for packaging that remains in California - not packaging that leaves the state or country. The regulation applies to any separable and distinct material component used for the containment, protection, handling, delivery, or presentation of goods by the producer for the user or consumer, ranging from raw materials to processed goods. This includes primary packaging (packaging that directly contacts the product) and tertiary packaging used for shipping, such as cardboard boxes and pallet wrap.

Under this regulation, packaging subject to these requirements is called "covered material." These include glass, ceramic, metal, paper and fiber, plastic, wood, and other organics. If you produce products using any of these packaging materials, this regulation may apply to you. However, certain exemptions and exclusions may reduce your compliance obligations - more on those below.

## Registration and Data Submission

SB 54 requires producers to work through a Producer Responsibility Organization (PRO), a nonprofit formed to implement compliance plans. Circular Action Alliance (CAA) is currently the only approved PRO in California and serves multiple state EPR programs. Producers may also comply individually if they meet certain requirements.

Producers must register with the PRO within 30 days of the regulation's effective date and submit 2023 calendar year supply data, including total weight of material and total number of plastic components sold, distributed, or imported into California.

After submitting preliminary supply data,

producers must provide qualitative information including brand lists for covered materials, corporate affiliates, and data preparation methodologies. Following registration and 2023 data submission, CAA will request previous year's data be submitted annually by May 31.

### Packaging Must be Recyclable or Compostable by 2032

The statute mandates that by 2032, all single-use packaging and single-use food service ware sold in California be recyclable or compostable. Registered producers must transition to compliant materials unless they receive an exemption or CalRecycle determines their packaging or packaging component qualifies for a categorical exclusion.

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*“The statute mandates that by 2032, all single-use packaging and single-use food service ware sold in California be recyclable or compostable.”*

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### Exemptions and Exclusions

The draft regulation exempts small producers (those with gross sales below \$1 million in the most recent calendar year), reusable or refillable packaging, and packaging for products with a five-year or longer lifespan, among others. Producers may indicate their intent to request an exemption from CalRecycle through the CAA registration portal.

There are also exclusions included in the current regulation draft, including a “categorical exclusion.” The draft regulation provides a process for entities to notify CalRecycle of categorical exclusions for packaging or packaging components used with food or agricultural commodities. An entity may seek an exclusion where it has determined that alternative packaging materials cannot reasonably comply with regulations, rules, or guidelines issued by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), or other applicable food or agricultural regulations. These might include food safety, quality, food

waste, or logistical conflicts with established requirements.

### Regulation Effective Date

In December, CalRecycle submitted its regulation to the Office of Administrative Law (OAL) for review. If approved, the regulation would have been submitted to the Secretary of State and become effective within 30 days. However, on January 9, CalRecycle withdrew its SB 54 regulations from OAL after receiving questions requiring clarification on several key issues. CalRecycle will address

these items before submitting them to OAL. Although a timeline for proposed amendments has not yet been announced, a 15-day comment period will follow any revisions. We estimate the earliest possible effective date of this regulation to be March 2026.

For guidance on how this regulation may affect your business and to better understand compliance requirements, please contact Abby Taylor-Silva at [ataylorsilva@ksclawyers.com](mailto:ataylorsilva@ksclawyers.com) or (831) 676-0958. This article is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. ☞

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# Discovering the STEM in Strawberries

By Suzanne Saunders Shaw



*This story was originally written to inspire elementary school teachers to create educationally packed field trips for their students. It first appeared in Santa Catalina's School newsletter. Fourth generation landowner (and Santa Catalina alumna) Tina Hansen McEnroe worked closely with Naturipe Berry Growers to introduce a group of 3rd graders to the concept of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) being integral to modern-day jobs in agriculture.*

It was a shivery spring morning at the sprawling Hansen-Dayton Ranch in Salinas when a class of 3rd graders bolted out of their yellow Santa Catalina school bus onto fields of green, white and red strawberry plants. To give these youngsters a whole new Tech-centric view of agriculture, landowner Tina Hansen McEnroe, herself a seasoned educator, teamed up with her tenant farmer, Naturipe Berry Growers, Inc., to teach the hands-on class.

## Meet the Smart Tractors!

Naturipe showcased one behemoth that cost \$300,000 while an even higher tech model sold for \$500,000. The cute little tractors

the children remember from their first storybooks have been replaced by very smart, and very expensive, chip-driven monster-machines.

Farmers guided the 8- and 9-year-olds as they climbed up and around massive tractors, equipped to handle highly specialized jobs from prepping the fields to planting the seedlings. They grasped that it took experts in STEM to make the tractors "smart".

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*"With giggles and glee, the children gathered the little lady beetles in their fingers, gingerly releasing them over the strawberries."*

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And they began to understand how highly skilled the drivers are as well, using software programs along with GPS guided tracking systems to plow the furrows, sow plants with millimeter precision, and deliver "medicine" over the berries when an "ag" scientist decides it's needed.

## Bad Germs and the "Safety Police"

"How do we keep our germs off the berries?" asked a woman whom the farmers nick-named the "Safety Police."

"Wear gloves!" said one alert girl. "Wash our hands!" proposed others. Since strawberries are fragile and easily bruised, they are typically harvested by hand and placed directly into clamshell containers while in the field. The students learned that farmers need microbiologists to keep bacteria from harming their berries.

"How long do we wash our hands?" the microbiologist asked the students. "Long enough to sing Happy Birthday" the children chorused. "TWICE" she corrected them. "A long 20 seconds." To demonstrate how easily bacteria spread undetected, the safety inspector had the students rub their hands with Glo Germ, a special gel that simulates hidden bacteria.

With multiple pairs of seemingly clean hands outstretched, the students eagerly waited to see their own germs GLOW as soon as the flashlight-sized UV light passed over their contaminated little hands. It was a fun, interactive way to introduce them to microbiology and food safety.





### Good Bugs, Bad Bugs and the Entomologist

Next, the 3rd -graders met Naturipe’s Research and Technical Director, a strawberry and insect scientist with a doctorate in entomology. Her specialty, she explained, is to biologically control the insects that want to eat the berries. The agriculture industry calls this area of science “integrated pest management” or IPM.

Passing out pint sized containers of lady beetles, the entomologist taught the kids how Naturipe Berry Growers use many millions

of “good” bugs, like ladybugs and predatory mites, to wipe out the “bad” bugs. This method protects their crops and ecosystems in a sustainable way by reducing the use of pesticides.

With giggles and glee, the children gathered the little lady beetles in their fingers, gingerly releasing them over the strawberries. It was a clever way to have them experience IPM firsthand, integrating a non-toxic solution to solve an environmental problem.

### Enter the Drones!

Demonstrating another fast-advancing area of Ag Technology, the farmers showed how remotely controlled drones deliver large payloads of predatory mites over their million-dollar crops. They showcased several models of these aerial acrobats, each with different jobs. And the students were thrilled by what they saw! They learned that the “good bugs” they had just released by hand onto a few plants at a time, can be carried by drones and dropped on a massive scale over field crops in a matter of hours.

It’s not unusual for farmers to pay upwards of \$30,000 for a drone that releases beneficial insects to save their harvests. And the students quickly computed that using drone technology to destroy harmful insects is better than spraying pesticides. They learned that it took engineers to build the drones, programmers to operate them, and environmental scientists to manage a balanced ecosystem. Plus, to these pre-teens, the drone controller’s job looked super cool.

To put a sweet ending to this Ag in the



Classroom session, Hansen-McEnroe, together with Naturipe, organized a strawberry picking contest. With rules, of course. Harvesting berries that were not red warranted immediate disqualification. It didn’t take long for the children to realize that even picking the strawberries took skill.

This well-planned farm trip ended with lunch in the field, generously donated by Sturdy Oil Company. The 3rd-graders then scrambled back on the bus, having had so much fun and so much new information about the importance of STEM, they just might want to pursue an AG career! . ☺

*Tina Hansen-McEnroe, has received state and national awards for developing Ag in the Classroom curricula.*

*Naturipe Berry Growers, Inc., headquartered in Salinas, was founded in 1917.*

*The writer, Suzanne Saunders Shaw, began her TV news career in the Salinas Valley covering the UFW strikes in the mid-70’s.*



# How Rancho Cielo's Ranch Cast is Teaching Youth the Art of Conversation and More

By Adam Joseph



The first thing you notice about Michael Jacobi isn't the résumé—though it's formidable—or even the voice, honed by more than five decades behind a microphone. It's the way he listens and expands upon the subtle cues he hears. Jacobi is a radio guy in the truest sense of the phrase. An award-winning broadcast journalist, a San Francisco Bay Area Radio Hall of Fame nominee and a veteran of local radio and television who has seen formats rise, fall and reinvent themselves. He's taught performance and personal branding to aspiring broadcasters and seasoned professionals alike. He knows the craft. He knows about the industry. And now, on a high school campus in Salinas, he's helping young people discover something even more potent than airtime: their own voices.

Last fall, Jacobi launched Ranch Cast, a weekly podcast recorded on Rancho Cielo's campus, as part of the organization's After School Program. For him, it felt like a natural evolution from traditional broadcasting into the ever-growing podcast world. He saw an opening—not just to adapt, but to give back.

From left: Ranch Cast Engineer Garrett Belev, Ranch Cast Producer/Host Michael Jacobi, Portola Hotel & Spa GM Janine Chicourrat, Drummond Culinary Academy GM Wanda Straw and DCA student Efrain Villa Valdez.

"What's particularly interesting and, I think, extraordinarily valuable to the students," he says, "is that we teach the art of conversation, the art of interviewing, and perhaps most importantly, the art of listening. And you would think that everybody would know that—but everyone doesn't."

In a world dominated by cellphones, notifications and half-heard exchanges, focus has become a radical act. For Jacobi, that's where the teaching begins. The microphone is just a tool; the real lesson is presence. Knowing how to follow a thought. Anticipating the next question instead of clinging to the last one. Understanding where a conversation is going and being ready when it gets there.

"The more you practice, the better off you're going to be," Jacobi explains. "It's good to be on a microphone, but if you're interviewing someone, you have to know the

next question, not the last question. Always be ready. That's really what we aim our curriculum at."

The payoff goes far beyond podcasting. These are skills that carry over into job interviews, classrooms, relationships and even first dates. Confidence builds. Shoulders straighten. Hesitation gives way to curiosity. And there are the moments educators live for.

"I've always heard stories about the great joy and the epiphany that happens when you reach a student," Jacobi says. "And that's already happened to us a couple of times." One of those moments came when Drummond Culinary Academy Instructor/Executive Chef Estevan Jimenez appeared on Ranch Cast alongside one of his students, Kadden Bennett. Jimenez later shared that he'd never heard Kadden open up so much. Those are the transformations Jacobi watches for. "Their eyes light up," he says. "You can see when they're sold on it."

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***"At its core, the After School Program is not an extension of the school day. It's a pathway to possibility."***

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Jacobi is adamant that Rancho Cielo students are not observers; they are collaborators. Every episode of Ranch Cast involves students in meaningful roles, learning by doing. Looking ahead, he envisions conversations that stretch across the community—politicians, local business leaders, cultural figures, anyone with a story that connects back to the mission.

So far, the guest list reflects the breadth of Rancho Cielo's community itself: local educators Dale Bartoletti and Steve

Nejasmich, founder Judge John Phillips, Rancho Cielo CEO Chris Devers, Master Gardener Julie Lorenzen, academic instructor Matt Marshall. On the horizon: voices from Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, the Raven Drum Foundation and even Def Leppard drummer and rock 'n' roll legend Rick Allen. "There are five million podcasts in this country," Jacobi says with a grin. "Whether you want to learn the cello or fix your kitchen sink, there's something for everyone. The days of interesting subjects [on Ranch Cast] are just beginning. That's what's fun and particularly rewarding."

Ranch Cast is one thread in a much larger tapestry.

Rancho Cielo's After School Program is built on moments like these—small victories that spark confidence, belonging and momentum. Since fall 2024, the program has aimed to create a safe, supportive space beyond the school day where students can



From left: Rancho Cielo Garden Manager Julie Lorenzen, John Muir Charter Schools paraprofessional, DCA student Kadden Bennett, Rancho Cielo Marketing & Communications Manager Tiffany Harbrecht, Ranch Cast Engineer Garrett Beleu and Ranch Cast Producer/Host Michael Jacobi.

receive individualized tutoring and credit recovery, college- and career-readiness support, enrichment activities, opportunities for connection, a hearty afternoon snack and care for their mental and emotional well-being. Every element works together to create stability, growth and hope.

"We've seen students make real breakthroughs," says the program manager, Terry Poole. "When they first come to campus, many are shy and standoffish. They join the After School Program to earn or catch up on credits, and through that process, they not only get caught up but sometimes even graduate sooner than they would have otherwise."

In 2025, the program expanded significantly, shaped by student interests and emerging opportunities. Alongside Ranch Cast, students can now explore introductory 3D printing, learn personal finance, develop bicycle skills and maintenance skills, and participate in equine-assisted learning and horsemanship through onsite nonprofit partner Hope, Horses & Kids.

Students can also enroll in the Student Success Seminar, a college course offered through Rancho Cielo's dual-enrollment partnership with Hartnell College. This is not only opening doors to higher education earlier, widening the lens on what's possible, but it allows students to earn credits toward

completing their high school education and college credit simultaneously.

At its core, the After School Program is not an extension of the school day. It's a pathway to possibility.

"These experiences build camaraderie—not just among students, but with staff, teachers, tutors and instructors," Poole says. "They create opportunities for one-on-one conversations to really understand where students are and where they want to go." A podcast might seem unlikely or, plainly, unrealistic for a small education-based nonprofit. But at Rancho Cielo, what's often considered impossible often becomes transformational.

On one hundred acres of ranch, there are thousands of stories waiting to be told, and now there is a new vehicle for voices to be heard.

Listen to Ranch Cast at 7am every Saturday on [santacruzvoice.com](http://santacruzvoice.com). All previous episodes are available to stream at [ranchocieloyc.org/category/ranch-cast](http://ranchocieloyc.org/category/ranch-cast). ☞



From left: Hope, Horses & Kids Executive Director Lori Tuttle and Hope, Horses & Kids Facilitator & Barn Manager Christy Petit.

| HOME SHOWCASE

# Erin & Sean Massa

*By Diane Gsell*

*Photography by Patrick Tregenza*



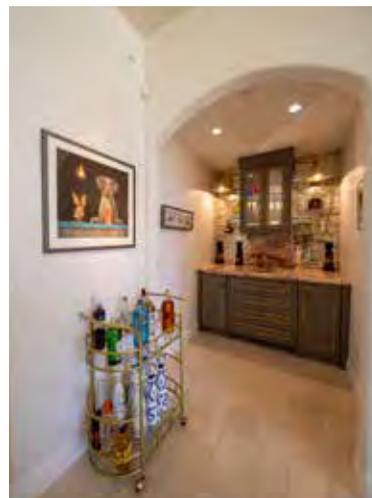


What's the secret to maintaining harmony in a blended family? Make sure the best seat in the house has room for all.

That's no easy task when said family has eleven members, unless, of course, you've got world-class interior designer, Marla Sher, on your team. Erin and Sean Massa leaned on this undeniable truth when it came time to reimagine the interiors of their newly acquired forever home. And that is why they are now the proud owners of a custom crafted horseshoe shaped couch that can comfortably, and stylishly, seat eleven and then some.

Born and raised in Salinas, the high school sweethearts reconnected after life had taken them in opposite directions for a few decades. Now both successful agricultural industry executives, they consider their tasteful perch on the 12th fairway of Pasadera the perfect place to come home to after their busy days at the office. They quickly learned that when your new neighborhood includes a golf club with lively pool and dining opportunities, it's easy to achieve a sense of community that can be enjoyed by the three generations that flow into the Massa residence.

Built in 2003 with a decidedly Mediterranean flair, the couple's stately 5-bedroom home was greatly in need of a refresh to modernize the classic tone. While the overall





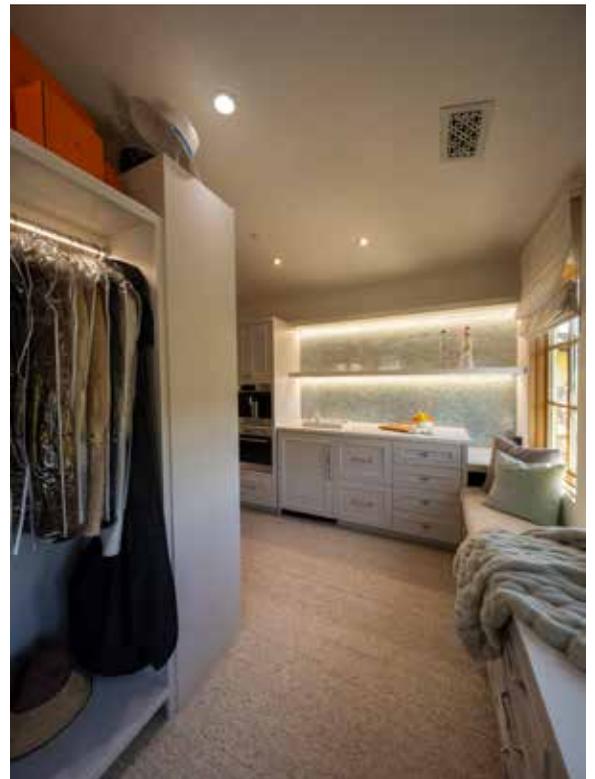




layout, beautiful ironwork, and a state-of-the-art wine room were maintained, dramatic visual upgrades were achieved throughout. Gone were the glitzy chandeliers, oversized mirrors, and dark wood built-in cabinetry, in were natural fibers, elegantly modern textured wallpapers, local art and, or course, the aforementioned favorite family room couch. Ample room for the cherished piece was achieved by removing a built-in bar that had limited the usable space in what is now the very heart of the home.

The result of the interior overhaul is a light-filled, contemporary home that's large enough to accommodate the couple's mostly grown children when they're around, yet still comfortable enough to feel welcoming to all. And while the focus of the home is all about family, the master suite has a few luxury elements reserved just for Erin and Sean. The walk-in closet includes a dedicated display case for Erin's handbags as well as illuminated closet rods that make it easy to locate wardrobe essentials. Should a closet this large and well-appointed encourage you to linger, don't fret if your sartorial diversions work up your appetite. The built in coffee station, refrigerator and microwave allow you to take all the time you need.

But if a full meal is what you desire, the home offers some



pretty special places to break bread in a more traditional setting. Just off the kitchen, the breakfast room has a cozy fireplace to take the chill off of foggy mornings and an adjoining patio for warmer weather. Out back, grazing around the fire pit is a popular option as is the outdoor dining area. But the grandest place of all to share a meal is Erin's favorite part of the home, the formal dining room which was totally transformed through the use of dramatic mural-style wallpaper created to fit the exact proportions of the room. Combined with an eye-catching sculptural light fixture, the wallpaper creates a unique sense of space to elevate any gathering.

Next up for Erin and Sean is phase two of the remodel, which will focus on culinary spaces both inside and out. The existing Tuscan-inspired kitchen will be reworked to match the aesthetic of the rest of the home, and a new outdoor kitchen will reinvent the backyard as a true epicenter for entertaining. While some couples on the cusp of retirement choose to scale down, the Massa's scale-up approach is a refreshing take on embracing the happy chaos that comes with doubling down on family. ☺





# Nonprofit Partnership for Children Celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> Year

By Mac McDonald



It's said that "Necessity is the mother of invention." Jennifer Ramirez had a dire need 10 years ago, her daughter had a complex medical condition that she had to address, but she felt the resources available at the time were challenging to access for many in the community.

So, she founded Partnership for Children (PFC) as its own independent organization in April 2016, became its Executive Director, and is responsible for its vision, strategy, and delivery of its services. The nonprofit is now celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

## From The Beginning

"I connected with the Children's Hospice and Palliative Care Coalition (the parent organization of PFC) because I was interested in improving healthcare access for kids, and resources and support for their families, because of my experience with my daughter's medical issues," says Ramirez. "I had found

that even with tremendous support from family and friends, and access to resources, it was still an immensely difficult experience. I could only imagine how much more difficult it was for those who didn't have the support and resources I had."

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***"Partnership for Children believes every child living with a life-threatening condition deserves access to medical care and the emotional support."***

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She started PFC, which was in the process of being dissolved, as an independent organization to continue its important work.

"In 2015, CHPCC decided to merge with the Coalition for Compassionate Care of California in Sacramento," she explains. "As

a local program, CHPCC's board decided to dissolve PFC and I did not want the families and kids to lose the vital services, so I worked quickly to establish it as its own independent nonprofit in 2016."

Ramirez was actually involved with PFC since 2011, when she became director for the organization when it was a program of CHPCC, for which she served as Deputy Director. Prior to CHPCC, she worked for more than 14 years in the nonprofit independent-living movement, advocating for the rights of people with disabilities, including those with serious illnesses, at Central Coast Center for Independent Living (CCCIL). Ramirez spent the latter five years of her work with CCCIL as Deputy Director.

She knew starting an independent nonprofit wouldn't be easy or even financially viable, but it's a testament to her and her organization's passion and commitment that it has reached its 10-year anniversary.

"When we started, it was just me and a part-time, 20-hours-per-week Family Services Coordinator, Michelle Carlos, with a very small budget and a lot of passion!" says Ramirez. "Since then, we've grown in many ways: in budget — when I started, we were under \$100,000 and our budget is now over \$800,000 — and in our offerings of programs and services. In addition to Transportation to Medical Care, we now have three additional core programs: Financial Assistance, Groceries, and Practical Support, as well as three Family Connections & Celebrations Programs: Social Connections, Sprinkles of Happiness! Birthday Program, and Holiday Celebrations, internal capacity — we have three full-time staff and five part-time drivers — and most importantly, in the depth with which we serve the children and families who place their trust in us."

“Partnership for Children believes every child living with a life-threatening condition deserves access to medical care and the emotional support needed to live life as fully as possible,” reads PFC’s mission statement. “Our mission is to increase access to medical care for seriously ill children and provide essential support to their families.”

### Important Services Provided

With that relatively simple, but essential mission, Partnership for Children serves more than 250 Monterey County children and their families every year for a variety of services, including:

- Providing safe, reliable transportation to local and Bay Area medical appointments.
- Delivering groceries, diapers, car seats, and household essentials.
- Offering financial relief for rent, utilities, and medical costs not covered by insurance.
- Bringing joy and respite through holiday programs like “Winter Wonderland.”
- Easing emotional stress through compassionate case management and referrals.



“It’s just really been a time of reflection,” says Ramirez about the 10th anniversary this year. “The biggest thing for me is really looking at the hundreds of families we’ve worked with. I’m feeling really honored that these families have trusted us during the hardest moments of their life. That’s very humbling. Years later just looking at the number of families impacted by us has been overwhelming.”

And while providing transportation to medical care and doctor’s appointments for seriously ill children is still the organization’s primary mission, the group’s services have expanded to be more comprehensive.

“It doesn’t feel like a lot of growth in the moment, but we have grown tremendously,” she says. “When we first started, we were a small organization, and we were focused on urgent needs. We were very reactive and taking urgent calls and providing transportation. Transportation does remain our main service; it’s the primary purpose of our mission to provide access to medical care. We have grown into a more comprehensive support system, and we are now more proactive. We are really wrapping these families with a network of support with a comprehensive list of services, not just addressing urgent needs, but looking at emotional support and providing practical support, helping families find meaningful action. It has grown so much, it brings me a lot of joy.”

### New Office Opens

PFC is not only celebrating its 10th anniversary, but also a new home — an office that houses PFC as well as Coastal Kids Home Care, a nonprofit pediatric home health agency, at 427 Pajaro St., Suite 5, in Salinas. A grand opening and ribbon-cutting ceremony was held in January with the Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce and Monterey Peninsula Chamber of Commerce.

“We’ve been talking with Coastal Kids Home Care for at least five years about moving in together because we serve so many of the same families, it just hasn’t aligned for us the last five years,” says Ramirez. “That this is happening now is really going to be a big boost for the families because we’re all in the same place. It’s just a way for them to be able to feel more wrapped up in services to see both of us at the same time and have a more coordinated approach. We’re excited to be here.”

While acknowledging that she’s operating in a very crowded nonprofit environment with ever-shrinking funding, especially from the federal government, she says that reaching out to other agencies and collaborating with them (such as with CKHC and now the Food Bank for Monterey County) is one way to stay viable.

“It’s in our name. It’s about working in partnership and working out ways we can collaborate with the community and increasing our funding sources,” she says. “Our biggest challenge is awareness. Really just getting awareness out in the community about our services.”

When asked about what she envisions for the organization for the next 10 years, she says it’s to stay the course and keep expanding.

To learn more visit: [www.partnerforkids.org](http://www.partnerforkids.org).

CG

# Life Time Sea Otter Classic Returns to Monterey

*Focus On Community, Family, and an Expanded Vision*

By Mike Hale | Photos Courtesy of Sea Otter Classic



Widely recognized as the largest cycling and outdoor sports festival in North America, each spring the Life Time Sea Otter Classic in Monterey reconnects people through movement, competition, and a collective passion for the great outdoors.

This April 16–19, the iconic WeatherTech Raceway Laguna Seca once again serves as ground zero for elite athletes, families, industry leaders, weekend riders, and first-time spectators — all sharing what to them has become a sacred experience. While the Sea Otter Classic draws roughly 75,000 attendees and 7,000 athletes over four days, those numbers only tell part of the story.

“It’s a celebration of cycling, but also the outdoors,” says Maddy Rivard, public relations spokesperson for the event. “It’s like a big family reunion in the Spring, bringing

people out of Winter hibernation to get moving, whether it’s on a bike or not.”

Beginning modestly in 1991 as a much smaller mountain bike racing event called the Laguna Seca Challenge, today’s Sea Otter Classic brings together different generations and disciplines in the same space. Professional and amateur racers compete in an atmosphere where kids learn to ride, where families explore the festival grounds, and outdoor enthusiasts discover new ways to stay active.

Professional and amateur athletes race across road, gravel, mountain, downhill, dual slalom, eMTB, and criterium disciplines. There’s also the Sea Otter Trail Run, Family Bike Day, kids’ races, balance bike rallies, youth programming, and a massive interactive expo that stretches well beyond bikes into nutrition, healthy living, and outdoor recreation.

## An Event Built on Giving Back

Produced by Life Time, a fitness and lifestyle brand focused on long-term health and wellness, the event leans into grassroots participation, volunteerism, family programming, and a focus on giving back to the community.

Behind the scenes, the Sea Otter Foundation plays a critical role in grounding the event in the local community. The Foundation supplies the backbone of the festival, more than 1,100 volunteers from the area who help make the four-day experience possible.

In 2025, more than 45 nonprofit, military, and community groups from throughout Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties provided volunteers to support the event. In turn, the Foundation awarded nearly \$90,000 in financial grants to these partners in recognition of their support.

The Foundation strives to create a positive impact through volunteerism, charitable giving, and community engagement. Through sports and recreation, it promotes a healthy and active lifestyle for children and supports recovering veterans through an e-bike program. It also works directly with local elementary schools through outreach that





extends the spirit of Sea Otter beyond race weekend.

### More Ways to Play Outside

While the Sea Otter Classic is known primarily as a cycling festival, 2026 brings thoughtful expansions that reflect how people live actively today.

New for 2026 is the Sea Otter Trail Run, offering two distances: a 17K (10.6 miles) course with 1,600 feet of elevation gain and a family-friendly 5K (2.8 miles). Both routes explore the trails of the Laguna Seca area before finishing on the iconic raceway track — complete with the full Laguna Seca experience. “It’s super cool to finish with all the pomp and circumstance of Laguna Seca Raceway,” Rivard said. “We already have a strong interest — over 200 signups and growing. It’s so obvious that people who love cycling participate in other outdoor activities, too.”

The 5K welcomes strollers, every participant receives a finisher’s medal, and the run offers a new way for runners and riders alike to kick off their Saturday morning. Elsewhere, one of Sea Otter’s most popular events — the Enduro — gets a major update. Expanded to two days for 2026, Stages 1 and 2 will take place at Laguna Seca on the

downhill and dual slalom courses, while Stages 3 and 4 move to Toro Park, just five miles away. Riders can expect steep descents, flowing trails, technical sections, and loose dirt that keeps things interesting.

Adding to the energy, e-bike categories debut in the Enduro for men and women in the Open and Sport divisions. The Sea Otter

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*“While the Sea Otter Classic is known primarily as a cycling festival, 2026 brings thoughtful expansions that reflect how people actually live actively today.”*

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criterium also returns to Laguna Seca, using a 1.2-mile loop that incorporates the famed Andreotti Hairpin. Unlike traditional flat criteriums, this course adds climbing, twists, and technical challenges, with results based on time and number of laps completed. And for fans of electric riding, the eMTB Race presented by Aventon returns with steep climbs and technical descents, four laps within the Laguna Seca venue, and a shared finishing lap for all categories.

### Sunday is Family Day

If there’s one day that captures the true heart of Sea Otter, it’s Sunday. Family Day is designed to remove barriers and invite everyone in. Admission for kids under 12 is free for all events, and adults get in free with a child. It’s an intentional welcome mat for families who may be new to the festival — or to cycling itself. “There is so much available for families,” Rivard says. “The perfect Spring Break, even a day trip — so much to pack into a day.”

The Family Zone inside the expo offers hands-on courses, activities, a scavenger hunt, and kid-focused programming. Many vendors bring youth-oriented gear, while the larger expo includes nutrition, healthy living, and outdoor lifestyle brands that extend well beyond cycling.

A Springtime Boost for Monterey County Sea Otter’s timing is no accident. April brings ideal weather and a natural kickoff to the cycling season, especially for elite athletes. But the economic and cultural impact stretches across the county. “It’s a great way to come together,” Rivard said. “For industry folks, so much spills out into a wider area. Group rides, dinners, industry events at local businesses.” Hotels fill up, restaurants buzz, and for a full week, Monterey County feels energized by people who come for bikes but stay for the place.

Festival grounds are open Thursday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., with most events centered at WeatherTech Raceway Laguna Seca.

By the time Sunday afternoon rolls around, families pack up balance bikes, volunteers trade high-fives, and racers cross one last finish line. “We attract elite athletes from more than 30 countries and 40 states, and people from all walks of life mark these dates on their calendar,” Rivard said. “When it’s over, all people can talk about is next year.”

For a complete schedule of events or information about tickets and sponsorships, visit [www.seaotterclassic.com](http://www.seaotterclassic.com). ☞

# Selling Salinas

*A Conversation With Colleen Finnegan Bailey,  
CEO Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce*

By Lorri A. Koster



## How long have you been on the job?

One year on the job. It was a perfect moment in time there was new leadership at the city level, new mayor, new city manager so I felt this was a moment where we could build bridges and make Salinas and the Salinas Valley better. The timing has been magical.

## You have a strong board.

I have an awesome board. I've been in the non-profit sector for a while now and Leonard Batti, our board chair, has been very supportive and hands-on. We just click. The Chamber has strong leadership at the board level.

## What's on your "to do list?"

We do our events, our ribbon cuttings, stuff like that but I am really focusing on economic development. I want to see projects move forward. We've been a strong voice in the housing element. This year we are focusing on infrastructure, water, wastewater, PG&E has things it's working on. We are putting together an Infrastructure Summit so we can educate on the issues and costs related to them. That's a big goal for this year.

We can't do anything as a community if our businesses can't be successful here and people can't afford to live here.

## I saw a rental assistance program on your website, is that something new for the Chamber?

We want to be a convener of different viewpoints and help bring people together. We aren't experts on these topics but let's get in the same room and have a meaningful conversation.

## Salinas is growing. What could be next?

The Soccer Complex is amazing, what they are doing out there. I think that's one of the strongest economic opportunities we have. They already hosted a tournament that had over 27,000 people attend. They have national and international interest from organizations wanting to host tournaments there because of the facility and our great weather. We just need more hotel rooms so we can generate TOT tax. The rodeo is growing their programming and WeatherTech Raceway, so we are working with sporting groups to come up with the data to encourage hotels to build here and freshen up the ones we have.

We need someone selling Salinas.

## What other opportunities do you have your eye on?

Sherwood Hall and the community center could be better utilized but its systems are over 50 years old. I just received a study on that. We could host more events there. We created a park and recreation coalition to align entities like the soccer complex and Big Sur Land Trust with Ensen Community Park and how we can leverage those assets. So, again, bringing people together.

## What about South County?

They've got housing going on down there and other economic development projects. King City has a lot going on as well as Gonzales. We started a new program this year called Salinas Valley Speaks which brought all the mayors together from Salinas Valley cities. It was well received. We are all dealing with similar issues. The city's general plan is being updated. It's a big lift going line by line.

## What's next?

I've been focused on city-level issues but want to branch out and work with the County more. The businesses in the Alisal area need a gap filled so we are reaching out there. A lot of things are coming our way. There's a next generation of leadership that needs to be identified.

Our Foundation just started a Career Pathways program. We bring in professionals from different industries and talk about what these jobs are really like. Finance, marketing, engineering... helping students understand the pathways. Good paying jobs that are right here in our area. The housing is still a challenge, but good jobs are here.

We started a Junior Chamber program, a training program for up-and-coming leaders. It's giving them mentorship from the board level but also having them reach out to the students through the Career Pathways. I think students like to hear from people closer to their own age as well.

It's been busy but it's all positive things when you look at economic development with the right leadership in the right place at the right time. ☺



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# A Girl's Trip to Argentina

By Lorri A. Koster | Photos Courtesy of Marilyn Rossi and Amy Small



An accordion player at the San Telmo market.

When avid traveler and Salinas native Marilyn Rossi decided to take her third trip to Argentina, who better to bring along than her childhood friend, Amy Small. Given Argentina's abundance of European architecture and multi-cultural art experiences, Amy, being an artist and interior designer herself, would be the perfect companion. The two travel together often, mainly to Mexico's San Miguel de Allende and Los Cabos region.

"This was my third trip to Argentina," Marilyn comments, "I went back to see the Andes and the beautiful wineries sprinkled

around the regions." She also went back for the people. "When I was there in 2006 the people were so poor and sad. There was no tourism. This trip it was good to see, under President Milei, a booming economy and new hope for the people—Argentina has a great soul."

For 17 days Marilyn and Amy traveled throughout Mendoza and Buenos Aires, spending most of their time in the country's capital: Buenos Aires. Rossi's favorite meal from the trip had to be a giant Milanesa she ate at the San Telmo market. Both travelers enjoyed Negroni and a good glass of chilled Malbec.

## Let's Learn More About Argentina

The second largest country in South America, Argentina (officially the Argentine Republic) is a country located in the southern cone of South America. To the west, the majestic Andes mountains provide a natural border with Chile. Looking East, the Atlantic Ocean. Argentina has its own agricultural heartland in the interior made up of flat, fertile grassland. This area is called the Pampas and the Pampean plains.

The country is divided into four regions: the Andes, the Pampas, the north, and Patagonia which covers the southern part of the country.

## Nature and Wildlife

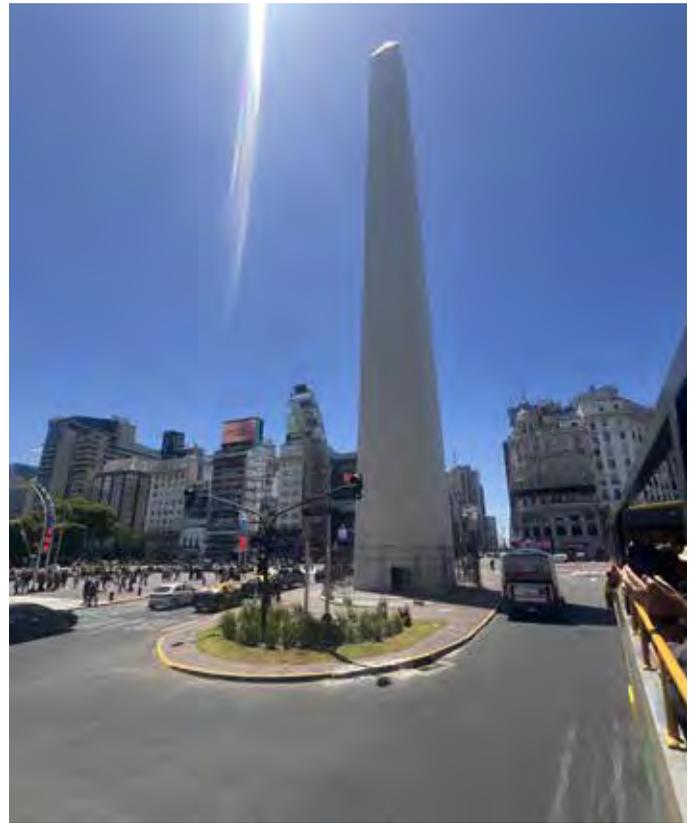
Animal species abound in Argentina. The Patagonia coast is home to marine creatures such as elephant seals, penguins, and sea lions. Sharks, orcas, and dolphins can be found swimming in the waters off the Atlantic Coast.



Shopping for the best Rhodochrosite jewels.



The French Embassy in Buenos Aires featuring European architectural flair.



The Argentine Obelisk stands 67.5 meters tall and marks the spot where the first Argentine flag was raised in Buenos Aires.

Further north you find a different spectrum. Flamingos, toucans, turtles, and crocodiles thrive in a more jungle-like climate. Patagonia, while sparsely populated, is rich in natural resources and wildlife, including herons, condors, pumas, tortoises, and guanacos—elegant animals closely related to llamas and alpacas.

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*“The diverse cultures provide a rich mix of architectural styles, culinary and musical arts.”*

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### People and Culture

Argentina has fewer native people than other South American countries with many immigrants coming from Europe, mainly Italy, Spain, and Germany. Astoundingly, 95 percent of the population is from European descent. Nearly half of the people live in the area around Buenos Aires. The people are known to be friendly and welcoming.



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Marilyn visiting Bodega Septima winery in Mendoza. Note the Andes looming in the background.



An area called La Boca in Buenos Aires where Italians immigrated due to its close location to the port. La Boca is also the heart and soul of soccer in Argentina—they have two national teams.

The diverse cultures provide a rich mix of architectural styles, cuisines, and musical arts. Argentina is known for its gauchos (Argentine cowboys), tango, soccer and asado.

**The Paris of South America**

Known for its preserved eclectic European architecture and rich cultural life, Buenos Aires is a multicultural city that is home to multiple ethnic and religious groups, contributing to its culture as well as to the dialect spoken in the city and in other parts of the country. Since the 19th century, the city, and the country in general, has been a major recipient of millions of immigrants from all over the world, making it a melting pot where many ethnic groups live together. Buenos Aires is considered one of the most diverse cities of the Americas.

**Mendoza**

The capital of the province of Mendoza in Argentina is located in the northern-central part of the province, in a region of foothills and high plains, on the eastern side of the Andes. Two of the main industries of Mendoza are olive oil production and Argentine wine. The region around Greater Mendoza is the largest wine-producing area in South America. As such,



One of the Congressional buildings. A good reputation of the influence of European architecture in the city.

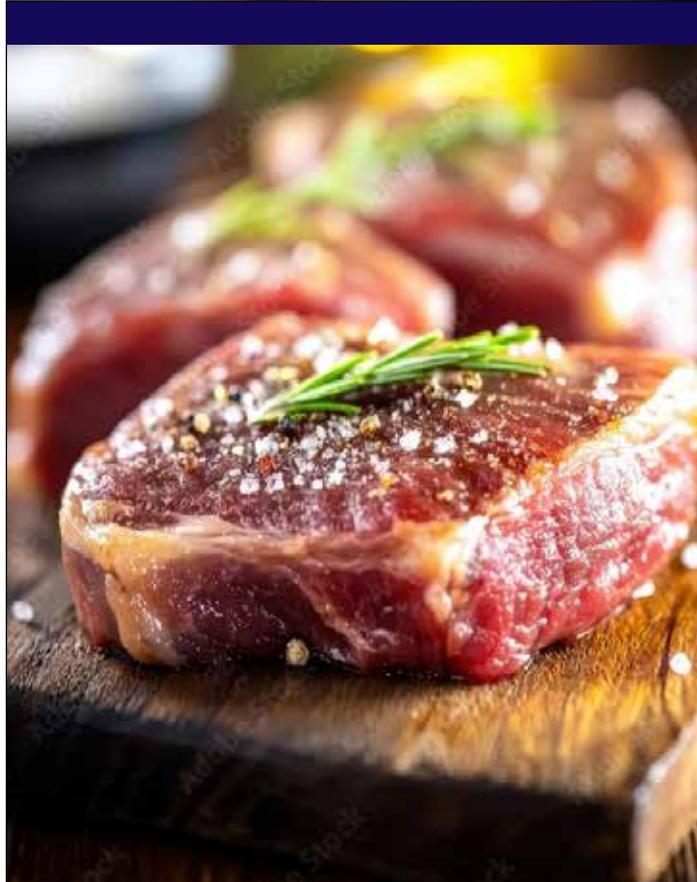


Casa Rosada, where the president works.

Mendoza is one of the eleven Great Wine Capitals, and the city is an emerging enotourism destination and base for exploring the region's hundreds of wineries located along the Argentina Wine Route.

Mendoza produces about 60 percent of the country's wine. The higher elevations have given rise to a higher quality wine industry. Main varietals grown include Malbec, Cereza, Bonards, Cabernet Sauvignon, Criolla Grande, Syrah, and Chardonnay.

Diversity in geography, culture, architecture, and cuisine makes Argentina's one of the most interesting countries in the South America. I can't think of a better place for two childhood friends to adventure to. *es*



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# Monterey County

*Where Wine Is a Family Conversation with the Land*

By Gwen McGill



*Jerry, Lawrence, Cynthia and Steve Lohr*

**M**onterey County's vineyards exist in constant dialogue with the Pacific Ocean. Fog rolls inland through the Monterey Bay, winds roar south through the Salinas Valley, and temperatures remain moderate year-round, all shaped by the ocean's proximity. These forces, combined with ancient geology and dramatic topography, define the region's vineyards and wines. Equally influential are the generational farming families whose continuity of leadership bridges Monterey's early modern wine era with today's sustainability-driven future.

While California wine is often described as young, Monterey tells a different story, one rooted in deep agricultural history and lived knowledge passed down through families. Here, winegrowing is not simply an industry; it is a lineage.

## **From Agricultural Roots to Winegrowing Legacy**

Commercial winegrowing in Monterey began in earnest in the 1970s, led by pioneers such as Jerry Lohr, Rich and Claudia Smith, Nikki Hahn, Jerry McFarland, and the Scheid Family. Their early vineyards laid the groundwork for what would become one of California's most important cool-climate regions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, families with multi-generational agricultural backgrounds, including the Caraccioli, Francioni, and Pisoni families, among others, expanded into winegrowing, bringing with them deep institutional knowledge of farming. They were soon joined by the Lee family of Morgan Winery, McIntyre family of McIntyre Vineyards and the Wagners at Mer Soleil Vineyards. Today, these generational family

farmers form the backbone of Monterey's wine community.

Now, a new generational transition is underway—one that is shaping the foundation for the next 50 years of Monterey County wine.

## **Balancing Scale with Stewardship**

Jerry Lohr planted 280 acres in the Arroyo Seco region in the early 1970s, recognizing its potential for Burgundian varietals. Over more than five decades, J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines has grown into one of Monterey County's most influential wine companies, helping elevate the region's national and international reputation. Jerry Lohr was also a founder of Monterey's first growers and vintners trade association.

Today, the company remains family-led under the direction of his children—Steve,

Cynthia, and Lawrence—who continue to balance growth with long-term land stewardship and community investment.

“We share knowledge and resources, support one another, and strengthen the broader ecosystem. It’s this collaborative, values-driven approach to business that makes Monterey not just a fabulous place to grow our grapes and to produce and bottle our wines, but a perfect place to build our legacy.” said Cynthia Lohr, chief brand officer for J. Lohr.

### A Family Tapestry of Vineyards

Despite decades in the region, winegrower Steve McIntyre considers himself a relative newcomer compared to neighbors whose families farmed the land for generations before him. Originally planted in 1973, McIntyre’s 80-acre Santa Lucia Highlands vineyard includes some of the appellation’s oldest Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines. Since purchasing the property in 1987, the family has replanted and upgraded the vineyard, becoming among the first in the Highlands to earn Sustainability In Practice (SIP) Certification and implement regenerative practices.

Today, McIntyre’s daughter, Kristen, serves as general manager, overseeing hospitality, events, wholesale sales, and the Carmel Valley tasting room.

“Our legacy is not our name but the land and vineyard we have the privilege of farming for a relatively short period of time, in terms of history,” Steve says. “We hope to provide stewardship and perfect our craft for as long as we can, before another family might have the opportunity to build upon our efforts.” Dan and Donna Lee arrived in Monterey in the 1980s, establishing Double L Vineyard

in the Santa Lucia Highlands and founding Morgan Winery. After building careers outside the wine industry, their twin daughters, Jackie and Annie, eventually joined the family business, another example of the region’s evolving generational arc.

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***“For Monterey’s long-established farming families, viticultural knowledge is cumulative.”***

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### Knowledge Passed Down, Not Written Down

For Monterey’s long-established farming families, viticultural knowledge is cumulative. It is built through decades of observation, understanding which clones ripen first, which blocks retain moisture in dry years, and when intuition matters more than technology. This knowledge is passed along informally at the dinner table, in the vineyard, and during harvest.

“Most of the great viticulture families are now onto the second generation, so overall, it’s a young industry. We need to continue what we know to be true, all the while being flexible in our understanding as we enter the latter half of many vineyard life cycles,” said Scott Caraccioli, second generation and General Manager of Caraccioli Cellars and the Escolle Vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands.

“What started in produce has turned into a love of viticulture and winemaking. Monterey County is a special place, so being part of this great community of farmers was

a considerable draw back home for me,” he added.

### Sustainability as Inheritance

For these families, sustainability is not a marketing strategy, it is a responsibility. When land is something meant to be passed down, decisions are made with a long view. Investments in organic farming, regenerative practices, and water stewardship reflect a belief that great wine depends on ecological health as much as winemaking skill.

“Multi-generational family businesses bring continuity, accountability, and heart to the wine industry. At J. Lohr, our family name on the bottle connotes deep responsibility,” says Cynthia Lohr, Chief Brand Officer for J. Lohr Vineyards and Winery. “We’re not beholden to quarterly returns, and while we focus on fiscal strength, we’re guided by a long-term view that prioritizes quality, sustainability, and people. This same ethos echoes throughout the Monterey wine community.”

### Looking Forward

As global wine consumption shifts and climate pressures intensify, Monterey’s generational winegrowing families are uniquely positioned to adapt. They continue to integrate new methods and technologies while relying on decades of earned wisdom. “We need to continue what we know to be true, all the while being flexible in our understanding as we enter the latter half of many vineyard life cycles,” said Caraccioli. “Being a multi-generational family business informs everything we do, from how we craft our wines to how we treat our colleagues and how we invest in our future,” added Lohr. ☞



Steve-McIntyre



Kristen McIntyre

# How a Party in the Library Transformed a Community

By Alla Zeltser



**T**wenty years ago, Hartnell College began a critical transformation. The Learning and Resource Center had just opened, the first new building on campus in many years. It was modern, light-filled, and beautiful. More than a library, it represented investment, momentum, and the future of a college deeply rooted in the Salinas Valley.

The question was how to bring the community inside.

Business and civic leaders did not typically come to campus, and certainly not in sassy cocktail attire. Hosting a gala at a community college was not the obvious choice, but a small and mighty group of volunteer leaders believed that if the community could experience Hartnell College differently, perceptions would shift and relationships would follow.

That belief launched Party in the Library. And thanks to our founding committee of Susan Gill, Karen Fanoie, Tina Lopez, and Kathy Moser, along with Beverly Grova and Alla Zeltser, a vision became reality.

The first event welcomed approximately 150 guests and raised just over \$100,000. The strategy was simple: create an event in Salinas to rival the best galas on the Peninsula and make it a PARTY. Convincing people to attend a formal fundraiser at the college required persistence and trust.

What guests discovered that night surprised them. A stunning new building. A transformed space. Spectacular food. Well-crafted cocktails. A lively dance floor. And most importantly, stories of students and programs that made clear why Hartnell College mattered.

Those early years established the foundation for what would come next. As word spread, the Party in the Library earned a reputation as one of the most enjoyable events in the region. Guests began to look forward to it. Sponsors returned and expanded. Attendance grew. The experience delivered on every level, but loyalty was never about

the event alone. Sponsors stayed because of their commitment to Hartnell College students and the work of the Foundation, both of which are central to the event every year.

That commitment shows in the numbers. Sponsor retention has exceeded 90 percent year after year. Many Party in the Library sponsors go on to support additional initiatives across the college, from athletics and the arts to major capital campaigns. The event has become both a celebration and a gateway to deeper engagement.

## THE Party, Reinvented

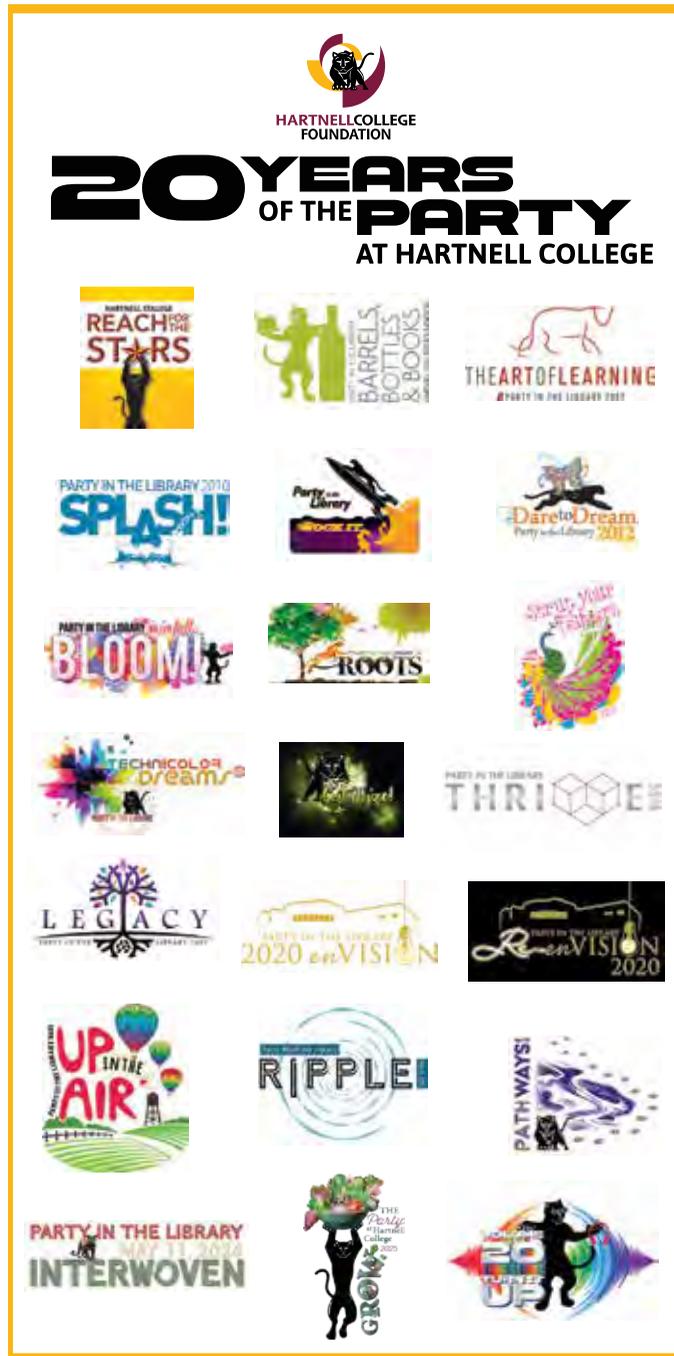
One of the defining features of the Party in the Library is its annual reinvention. Every year introduces a new theme that reflects what is happening at Hartnell College and where the institution is heading. The artwork, invitations, décor, collateral, and program all change to tell that story. Guests often choose their dresses and shirts to match the theme, turning the event into a shared act of creativity and unity.

By 2019, Party in the Library had grown to more than 400 guests, packing the library to the brim. Sponsorships reached new heights. That year, the event raised more than \$500,000 for Hartnell College students, marking the most successful Party in the Library. The growth reflected trust built over time and a community that felt connected to the mission.

Then, in March 2020, everything changed.

Two months before the Party in the Library, the pandemic shut down the world. The theme that year was “enVision.” Faced with uncertainty, the decision was made to pivot rather than pause. The event was rebranded as “re-enVision” and transformed into a fully virtual experience. At a moment when many organizations canceled





their galas, the Party in the Library moved forward.

The response was remarkable. Confirmed sponsors stayed on and new sponsors joined. To bring the celebration to people's homes, sponsor baskets were delivered to guests, complete with party hats and tiaras, cocktail glasses and mixers, sparkle rings, and playful details that echoed the spirit of the event. On the night of the virtual Party in the Library, screens filled with guests dressed for the occasion, wearing their party gear and showing up for Hartnell College in a completely new way.

The following year presented a different challenge. In 2021, gathering guidelines changed constantly. Capacity limits shifted. Requirements tightened and loosened week by week. The Party

became Party Near the Library, moving outdoors and adapting in real time. It was the first major event in Monterey County to bring people back together again.

Attendance was capped at 300. Guests stayed within small social bubbles. The event had to be fully outdoors. Every element required reinvention. The theme captured the moment perfectly: "Up in the Air." The artwork featured Oscar, Hartnell's panther mascot, floating in a hot air balloon. (And yes, there was an actual hot air balloon on site for photos!)

Despite the complexity, the event delivered. Two different stages. Four bands. A live auction. Compelling student stories. A huge outdoor screen. Sponsor names displayed on the lawn. Against all odds, it became one of the most successful Parties ever. After months of isolation, the community was eager for connection, and the gratitude was palpable. The joy of being together again carried the day. The new format became such a hit that guests are split on "In the Library" versus "Near the Library" for their favorite format! As such, THE Party @Hartnell College was born – giving the Foundation the opportunity to change the location from year to year to best suit the circumstances, committee desires, and the honoree.

#### Hartnell College Foundation Leadership Award

Through every iteration, three constants remain: the mashed potato bar, Butch Lindley at the helm of the auction and, most critically, the leadership and dedication of the volunteer committee. For twenty years, more than sixty committee members have shaped the Party's vision and execution. Their commitment has driven the event's success and ensured that it continues to benefit Hartnell College students. The Hartnell College Foundation Leadership Award, presented annually at THE Party, recognizes individuals whose leadership, generosity, and long-term commitment have played a meaningful role in advancing the Foundation and the students it serves. The 2026 Leadership Award will be presented collectively to the more than sixty volunteer committee members who have shaped, stewarded, and elevated the Party in the Library, Party Near the Library, and THE Party. Volume 20. Turn It UP!

THE Party @Hartnell College stands as the Foundation's flagship event and largest source of unrestricted funding. It has raised over \$7 million directly and inspired many millions more through sustained engagement and leadership development. It has helped cultivate donors, board members, and partners who believe deeply in Hartnell College.

Jackie Cruz, Executive Director of the Hartnell College Foundation, sees the impact clearly. "The Party has shaped the success of the Foundation in ways that go far beyond a single evening," she says. "It has built relationships, created trust, and given us the flexibility to invest where students need it most. As importantly, The Party provides the opportunity to thank our leaders and donors in a wonderful and thoughtful way."

In 2026, THE Party celebrates its twentieth anniversary with Volume 20. Turn It UP! honoring both the history and the momentum of the event and the people who made it possible. From the tiny but mighty founding committee members to decades of volunteers, sponsors, and supporters, THE Party tells the story of what can happen when a community believes in its college. 

# Girls On The Run

Race Photography Courtesy of Patricia Bose



**F**ounded in 1996, Girls on the Run International is a nonprofit that has served over two million girls across North America. Founded in 2024, Girls on the Run Central Coast is dedicated to making an impact on girls' lives in our community.

Everyone deserves to experience the joy of finding a community, developing friendships, and building confidence. Girls on the Run creates a welcoming environment where participants can discover their spark and take it far beyond the finish line. Why do we do this? Because we know that within every girl is a brave and worthy soul capable of achieving her dreams.

To empower young girls through running and life skills, Girls on the Run Central Coast offers the following programs:

- Provides a supportive environment for girls to build confidence and self-esteem.
- Combines training for a 5K run with lessons on healthy living and teamwork.
- Encourages positive emotional, social, and physical development.
- Engages trained coaches to mentor and inspire participants.
- Fosters community involvement through local 5K events.
- Offers scholarships to ensure accessibility for all girls.

At Girls on the Run Central Coast, teaching essential life skills is the cornerstone of our research-based programs. Trained volunteer coaches facilitate lessons that blend physical activity with life skill development, including managing emotions, fostering friendships, and expressing empathy.

## 3rd-5th Grade Programs

Girls on the Run inspires individuals of all abilities to discover, build, and grow their self-confidence. Together, they experience a sense of belonging and connection as a team. Volunteer coaches facilitate lessons that blend physical activity with life skill development, including managing emotions, fostering friendships, and expressing empathy. At the end of the season, the team completes a Community Impact Project and a 5K together, which provides a tangible sense of accomplishment and sets a confident mindset into motion.

## 6th-8th Grade Programs

Our Heart & Sole middle school program is designed to meet the unique needs of 6th-8th grade girls of all abilities. The program considers the whole person – body, brain, heart, spirit, and social connection. Heart & Sole offers an inclusive place of belonging, where participants feel supported and inspired to explore their emotions, cultivate empathy, and strengthen their physical and emotional health. At the end of the season, all team members complete a 5K.

## Confidence Through Accomplishment

Each season ends with a celebratory 5K. This closing event gives program participants of all abilities a tangible sense of accomplishment. Crossing the finish line instills confidence through completion and is a joyful moment program participants always remember! Everyone in our program receives a commemorative medal to celebrate this incredible achievement.

This year's 5K in Monterey County will be on May 9, 2026 in Salinas California. To learn more and get involved visit [www.gotrcentralcoast.org](http://www.gotrcentralcoast.org).



# Feed the Soul

## *When Carmel Came Together to Feed Its Neighbors*

**O**n a crisp December evening in Carmel-by-the-Sea, the courtyard at The Pocket glowed with more than holiday lights. It shimmered with generosity.

Laughter drifted through the air, glasses clinked, chefs moved from station to station offering bites crafted with care, and neighbors greeted neighbors — some longtime friends, others meeting for the first time — all drawn together by one shared purpose: to make sure no one in Monterey County goes hungry.

This was Feed the Soul, the third annual charity celebration hosted by The Pocket in partnership with the Food Bank for Monterey County. And this year, something extraordinary happened.

By the end of the night, the community had raised \$200,000 — a record-breaking total that will help provide food and nourishment to thousands of families, seniors, and children across the county.

In a place known worldwide as The Salad Bowl of the World, the reality of food insecurity can feel invisible. Yet one in four residents in Monterey County struggles to access enough nutritious food. Feed the Soul brings that reality into focus — not with heaviness, but with hope.

“It was incredible to see how many people from the Monterey Peninsula and all over came out to support such a great cause,” said The Pocket’s executive chef Mike Fischetti. “Raising \$200,000 to help feed our community and throwing the best party of the holiday season here at The Pocket makes all of the hard work building up to Feed the Soul worth it. I can’t say thank you enough to this wonderful community for the overwhelming support for us at The Pocket and the Food Bank.”

Fischetti, whose culinary career includes cooking at the James Beard House, curated the evening around a shared table philosophy — chef-driven food stations, local wine and spirits, live entertainment, and a lively silent auction filled with one-of-a-kind experiences. Guests wandered from bite to bite, discovering new flavors while rediscovering the joy of gathering. But beyond the food and festivities was something deeper: a sense of belonging.

People lingered. They talked. They laughed. They bid generously. And in doing so, they turned a night out into something much more powerful — a night that will ripple outward into food pantries, school meal programs, and family tables across Monterey County.

The Food Bank for Monterey County, the region’s largest provider of emergency supplemental food, serves one in four residents. Events like Feed the Soul help make that work possible — transforming celebration into compassion, and community into action. ☪

**1.)** Left to right: Hilary Fish (center) and friends gathering during Feed the Soul at The Pocket, where the Monterey Peninsula community came together to raise \$200,000 to fight hunger. **2.)** Left to right: Melissa Dickie Evans and Jacob Weidemann of WhistlePig at Feed the Soul 2025, supporting the Food Bank for Monterey County during the record-breaking holiday fundraiser at The Pocket Carmel-by-the-Sea. **3.)** Left to right: April Montgomery of Links Club and friend at Feed the Soul 2025, celebrating an evening of giving in support of the Food Bank for Monterey County. **4.)** Left to right: Teresa Cloyd and friend enjoying Feed the Soul, the annual holiday celebration benefiting the Food Bank for Monterey County.



# Salinas Regional Soccer Complex Announces Landmark \$250,000

## *Partnership with Costa Family Restaurants*

The Salinas Regional Soccer Complex announced a five-year, \$250,000 partnership with the Costa Family Restaurants, marking a major vote of confidence in the future of the Complex.

This investment supports the continued growth of the Salinas Regional Soccer Complex, which already welcomes more than 11,500 weekly users. With lighted fields, year-round programming, and regional and statewide tournaments, the Complex has become a beloved community hub and an economic driver for the Salinas Valley.

Currently in the middle of a \$45 million capital campaign, the Salinas Regional Soccer Complex is actively building out Phase 3, which will add seven new tournament-size grass fields as well as eight soccer sand courts to meet overwhelming community demand. When fully built out, the Complex will serve more than 22,000 people weekly and will stand as the largest sports facility of its kind between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Ray Costa, founder of the Costa Family Restaurants and longtime McDonald's owner-operator, said his support is rooted in impact, not the sport itself.

"What stood out to me was the bigger picture. This is about community, health, and opportunity," Costa said. "Our company philosophy is to help families and children, and when you see how many families the Complex serves every week, the impact is undeniable. It keeps our kids busy and on the right track. We are proud to be a part of it."

The partnership was shaped by a strong alignment of values between the Salinas Regional Soccer Complex and the Costa Family Restaurants. The Complex provides safe, accessible space for youth and adults, strengthens family connection, opens doors for young people to succeed in their sports and educational goals, and delivers measurable community benefits at scale.

Board member Ian Jones emphasized the importance of Costa's hands-on engagement.

"We are deeply grateful that Ray took the time to come out, learn about the Salinas Regional Soccer Complex, and see the impact firsthand," Ian Jones said. "Once you stand on the fields, meet the families, and understand the scale of what is happening here, it is impossible not to believe in it. Ray's partnership reflects a genuine commitment to the Salinas Valley and to doing something meaningful for the community."



(l to r): Salinas Regional Sports Authority Business Development Committee Member-Michael Millett, CEO Costa Family Restaurants-Raymond Costa, Catherine Fuentes-Costa, SRSA Board Member-Ian Jones, SRSA Board Member-Catherine Kobrinsky-Evans, SRSC Dir. Of Operations-Edwin Hermosillo, SRSC General Manager-Jonathan De Anda, SRSA Board Member-Dr. Carissa Purnell

The partnership is a strong example of how business and community thrive together, and the Salinas Regional Soccer Complex welcomes the opportunity to build lasting partnerships, based on shared values, with the business community. ☺



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# Big Sur Foragers Festival

*Brings Community Together in Support of Local Health Care*

*Photography By Jim Pinkney Photo*



Each winter, Big Sur's forests, kitchens, and gathering places come alive in a way that celebrates not only the region's extraordinary natural resources, but also the deep sense of community that defines the coast. The Big Sur Foragers Festival once again delivered on that tradition, bringing together chefs, wineries, foraging experts, volunteers, and supporters for several days of connection, education, and purpose — all in support of the Big Sur Health Center.

## Mushrooms On the Menu

At the heart of this year's festival was the always-anticipated Big Sur Fungus Face Off, a sold-out culinary event that showcased the creativity of local chefs and the flavors of the season's foraged ingredients. Guests gathered beneath the redwoods for an afternoon of tasting, pairing, and celebrating, while directly contributing to a cause that touches nearly everyone who lives, works, or visits the Big Sur coast.

Thanks to strong community participation, this year's festival raised more than \$45,000 to benefit the Big Sur Health Center — a vital non-profit that provides accessible, affordable, and high-quality healthcare to residents, workforce members, and visitors in one of California's most geographically isolated regions. For many along the coast, the health center is not just a clinic — it is a lifeline, offering essential medical services in an area where distance, weather, and limited infrastructure can make access to care especially challenging.

## Experiencing Big Sur

One of the most beloved components of the festival is the Wild Foraging Walk & Talk Hikes, which invite participants to explore Big Sur's forest landscape alongside experienced guides. These educational walks offer hands-on learning about local fungi, plant life, and the delicate ecosystems that thrive in the region. More than a simple hike, the Walk & Talks deepen appreciation for the land while reinforcing the importance of stewardship, sustainability, and respect for natural resources.

The Fungus Face Off itself brought together an impressive lineup of chefs and winery partners, each presenting unique dishes inspired by foraged ingredients. This year's award-winning creations reflected both technical skill and creative storytelling, from hearty, comforting plates to inventive interpretations of seasonal mushrooms. Guests voted for their favorites, adding to the festive, participatory spirit of the afternoon.

Adding to the impact was the festival's silent auction, which featured more than 30 curated items and experiences generously donated by local businesses and supporters. From artisan goods to exclusive experiences, the auction became another meaningful way for attendees to give back while supporting the health center's ongoing work.

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*“More than a simple hike, the Walk & Talks deepen appreciation for the land while reinforcing the importance of stewardship, sustainability, and respect for natural resources.”*

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## Collaborating for Community

What makes the Big Sur Foragers Festival so special is not just the food, the wine, or even the stunning setting. It is the way the event weaves together education, creativity, and philanthropy — reminding everyone that caring for the land and caring for people are deeply connected. Every ticket purchased, every auction bid, and every shared meal helps ensure that quality healthcare remains available on the Big Sur coast.

In a region defined by rugged beauty and strong community ties, the festival stands as a powerful example of what's possible when people come together with a shared purpose. The Big Sur Foragers Festival is more than a celebration of foraged cuisine — it is a celebration of care, connection, and commitment to the health and well-being of the coast. ☪





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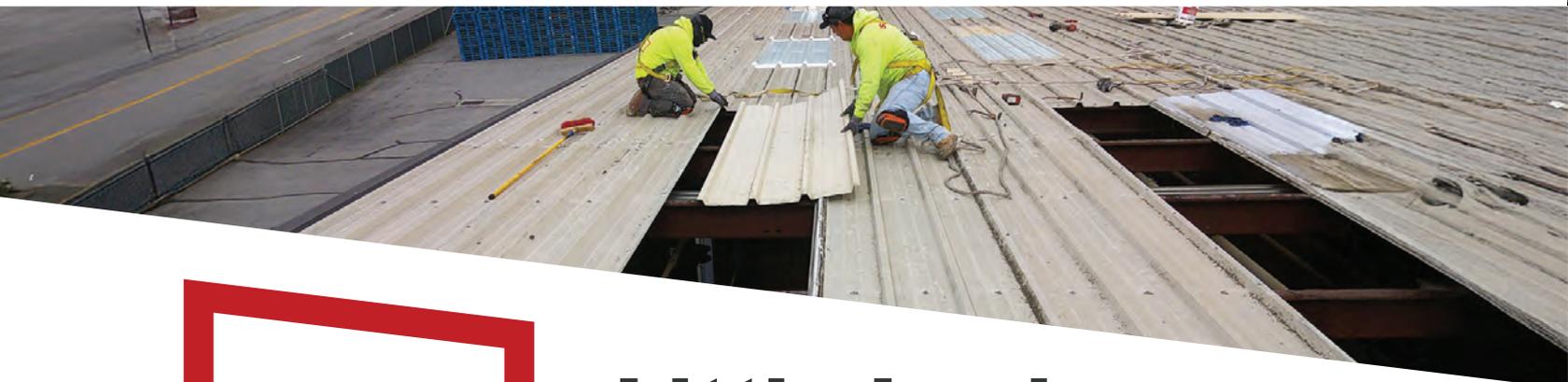
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