

Touring California

State shows off farm technology to UN delegation

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A United Nations delegation got a glimpse of California farm technology and sustainability in a two-day visit to the Golden State hosted by the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation.

Representatives from the Republic of Korea, Republic of the Congo, Bangladesh and Portugal toured agricultural processing facilities, water projects, wineries, biotech industries and a Central Valley dairy.

Robert Hodgen, vice president of J.D. Heiskell & Co. in Tulare and a member of Agricultural Leadership Class 36 that hosted the delegation, said the trip is a follow-up to one his class took to New York City to visit the United Nations and to meet U.S. Ambassador John Bolton. Hodgen said the California visit was arranged with Bolton's staff to showcase how California farmers use technologies to produce food more efficiently and with greater care for the environment.

"Our goal for the whole tour is to showcase California agriculture. We have two days to do it as they are flying in and out of Sacramento. One of the things we are focusing on is technology," Hodgen said. "It part of the cultural and leadership learning process for us and exposing us to different people from throughout the world."

After a tour of the Blue Diamond almond processing plant in Sacramento, the delegation visited the Castelanelli Dairy in Lodi to view milk production. They also saw the operation of an \$800,000 methane digester, which produces electricity from the dairy's 1,600 cows.

Owner Larry Castelanelli said the two-year-old system has been running about 14,000 hours, converting tons of manure and liquid wastewater into electrical power and a source of bedding material and fertilizer for his 1,700-acre diversified farm.

"It is a very simple system and it is proven technology," Castelanelli said. "Unlike solar energy, this place runs 24 hours a day producing power." However, he said one big drawback to the system is the difficulty of selling the excess power he generates to PG&E.

Kristen Hughes of Sustainable Conservation, who works with valley farmers like Castelanelli and organizations like RCM Digesters of Berkeley to promote sustainable agricultural practices, described the benefits of Castelanelli's system to the UN delegation.

"We are turning greenhouse gas emissions into a renewable energy source," Hughes said. "We are looking into adopting a model that Sweden is now using and taking some of that methane and using it to run vehicles or putting it directly into utility pipelines to generate electricity and using it on farms to generate electricity."

Richard Terrell Miller, who works on Bolton's staff as the U.S. representative on the UN's Economic and Social Council, was impressed with the California tour and the exposure of UN ambassadors to California agriculture.

"When they visit parts of the United States that are different from New York City, they get an entirely different view. Our goal is to get them to see some of the great agricultural manufacturing capabilities we have and get a different view of America and our society," Miller said. "Also, we hope there are some commercial linkage of some kind or some cultural linkages that grow out of these contacts that they make here. It is a real winning operation for everybody."

Miller accompanied a UN delegation to Iowa a few weeks ago to learn about corn and soybean

production. He said there are 191 missions in New York, so it is a pretty concentrated group of international people to draw from.

"We try to do about eight or 10 of these trips a year," Miller said.

Joao Salgueiro, an ambassador to Portugal, expressed interest in the dairy operation and noted how similar techniques and technology are to other parts of the world.

"You can see that agriculture is quite extensive here, extensive in production and it is very similar to Holland, the techniques are the same in the ways cows are milked and how they are cared for," Salgueiro said. "What is different here is the extension of the land and the amount of animals on farms."

Dr. Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, ambassador to Bangladesh, was similarly impressed by what he saw, and he said that field trips like the one to California are viewed by his colleagues at the UN as important.

"This is one way of intellectually re-energizing ourselves. America is so vast, America is so complex, America is varied," Chowdhury said. "In many ways, it is a microcosm of the world, and it does us well to come out of New York to see parts of America and also to learn more about the issues that we discuss at the United Nations – the environment, agriculture, sustainable development."

The UN's Richard Miller said one important benefit of trips to various states is to improve trade relations.

"One of the big issues we are trying to achieve in our trade negotiations is greater acceptance of genetically modified foods," Miller said. "That is another way we can expose people to that."

Miller's point was brought into focus when the question about biotechnology was broached with Cho Hyun, ambassador to the Republic of Korea.

"We have some concerns expressed by Korean NGOs that if and when the Korean agricultural market is open, it will be wiped out because of high productivity from farmers in California derived from biotechnology," Hyun said. "Understanding it better will certainly be helpful to promote trade and remove unnecessary anxiety over trade, not only in the area of trade, but we also learn from each other about good technology and good systems. "

The UN delegation toured the UC Davis genome center and laboratory to learn about work being conducted on plant disease resistance, salt tolerance and intellectual property issues. The group also toured the Calgene campus of Monsanto at Davis.

Michael Barr, president of California Agricultural Leadership Foundation, said the visit underscored the need for dialogue about agricultural issues from an international perspective.

"It is critical that California's agricultural leaders and policymakers understand the international dimension of agriculture," Barr said. "Hosting this United Nations delegation is one of the many ways that California Agricultural Leadership Foundation gives our leadership fellows and alumni that perspective.

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