



# Commentary: We must work to save 4-H and local farm advisors



Issue Date: [March 18, 2020](#)

By Taylor Roschen

They say your branches only reach as high as your roots go—and Farm Bureau's roots go deep. Often forgotten when we discuss the California Farm Bureau's 100-year history is our roots within the University of California system and the Cooperative Extension Service.

Prior to the state Farm Bureau's founding in 1919, in order to bring the extension service and all its educational programs to a county, that county had to have a farm organization. So, in Humboldt in 1913, and then Yolo, San Joaquin and San Diego counties in 1914, local farmers, ranchers and dairy farmers came together and created the state's first county Farm Bureaus.

Since Farm Bureau's inception, farmers have worked with UC to guide them through more than a century of change and growth, confronting difficult challenges and pursuing new opportunities. Our relationship with Cooperative Extension has persisted as we have grown together.

Today, the breadth and depth of agricultural knowledge created by UCANR, the UC Agriculture and Natural Resources Division, is unparalleled. Local Cooperative Extension staff, such as farm advisors and community education specialists, serve as translators, sharing the power of UC research with our farms, our families and our communities. And in a time when regulators, customers and neighbors ask more of us, it's even more important that we use Cooperative Extension staff as problem-solvers, collaborators and educators.

Yet despite UCANR's worth, its programs have found themselves teetering on the edge. Since 1990, the state's contribution to UCANR has decreased by 57%. In actual dollars, when adjusted for inflation, that's a loss of \$29.5 million.

As a result, UC has lost more than half of its farm advisors and specialists. That means areas of the state are without service, advisors work beyond their specialty and farms lose trusted, objective, practical scientific voices in the community. Under the guidance of Vice President Glenda Humiston, UCANR has tried to pinch and save, but options are limited.

An analogous—but more heartbreaking—story can be told about one part of UCANR: the 4-H Youth Development Program.

With more than 155,000 students enrolled, 4-H is one of the nation's best hands-on learning programs. Delivered through the Cooperative Extension service model since 1912, 4-H encourages personal growth and community volunteerism.

4-H youth leaders are 3.5 times more likely to contribute to their communities and nearly five times more likely to pursue higher education. They continually outpace non-4-H students in academic performance, with more than 87% of students pursuing college or graduate degrees. By focusing on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and applied learning, 4-H clubs prepare the next generation of students—urban and suburban, rural and farm—to step up and meet the future.

But once again, regardless of its successes, the 4-H Youth Development Program is also at risk.

As an unintended consequence of UCANR budget cuts, 4-H community education specialists and advisors have become collateral damage. Local programs experience tremendous turnover, staff people must serve multiple counties with thousands of participants, and vacancies proliferate. California has lost more than 60% of our 4-H advisors since the 1990s and now have the equivalent of only 31 program representatives to serve the state's 58 counties.

For those 4-H leaders who remain, the options are few: increase program fees and price low-income families out, rely on counties that can ill afford it to pick up more of the tab or, in the worst circumstances, try to raise funds to support their own jobs. Every dollar spent covering salaries and benefits means one less dollar available to improve student experiences, broaden participation and prepare the leaders of tomorrow.

So, though Farm Bureau's roots with UCANR run deep, that doesn't mean we don't worry about the storms.

To bring UC programs back from the brink, the California Farm Bureau is working with Assembly Agriculture Committee Chair Susan Eggman, D-Stockton, to fight for our future and save 4-H and local farm advisors and specialists. We are petitioning the state Legislature and the Newsom administration to provide an additional \$20 million annually to UCANR.

If you're a 4-H alumnus or fan, use Cooperative Extension programs or support your local farm advisor or specialist, contact your legislator and share their importance to you and your community. Please encourage them to support the California Farm Bureau's request for an additional \$20 million for UCANR. More information can be found at [www.cfbf.com](http://www.cfbf.com); follow the link reading "Save 4-H and Local Farm Advisors."

(Taylor Roschen is a policy advocate for the California Farm Bureau Federation. She may be contacted at [troschen@cfbf.com](mailto:troschen@cfbf.com).)