83 Yellow starthistle continues its spread in California
Pitcairn et al.
A review of prior studies, a new county survey and an abundance map by township demonstrate the noxious weed’s startling spread during the past century.

91 Well-placed bat houses can attract bats to Central Valley farms
Long, Kiser, Kiser
Bat houses on structures with shade or morning sun, and within one-quarter mile of water, were most often occupied by bat colonies, which could help boost insect control.

95 New crop coefficients developed for high-yield processing tomatoes
Hanson, May
Yields of Central Valley tomatoes have improved 50% without increasing water needs; new crop coefficients based on 4 years of field data were developed.

100 Fall foliar sprays prevent boron-deficiency symptoms in grapes
Christensen, Beede, Peacock
Vineyard boron deficiencies occur in certain soils on the San Joaquin Valley’s east side, Sierra foothills and North Coast; fall foliar sprays are an effective remedy.

Letters

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
The editorial staff of California Agriculture welcomes your letters, comments and suggestions. Please write to us at calag@ucop.edu or 1111 Franklin St., 6th floor, Oakland, CA 94607. Include your full name and address. Letters may be edited for space and clarity.

The politics of market incentives
At the end of his interesting article (“Market incentives could bring U.S. agriculture and nutrition policies into accord,” January-March 2006), Josh Miner asks about making targeted cuts in a commodity support program to free more resources for the food stamp program.

The agribusiness lobbyists who purchased the relevant political influence to get those programs and funding in place are not going to easily acquiesce to their reduction. No governmental budget is an equal playing field where only the most worthy projects are funded.

Food stamp recipients are not likely to have money for campaign contributions, and they are not well organized into a block of committed voters on this issue. Since their numbers tend to be in urban areas, their representatives often prefer to be on committees that deal with urban issues. The way forward for Miner’s proposal would be to get the food stamp program and other related programs moved into federal health, education and welfare departments or into housing and urban development departments, where the voices of the poor are heard most clearly. Agricultural committees represent farmers and the interests of rural states that grow the food, not the people who mainly eat it.

Complicating the problem is the current trend to cut back farm subsidies in general as a part of free trade, and use world trade as a method to assist developing countries. The funds that Miner wants to use may shortly no longer exist.

Bruce Bibee
Rosemead, Calif.

Josh Miner responds:
Bruce Bibee’s point about the political (un)feasibility of cutting or redirecting commodity support payments might seem intuitive, but is more appropriate to a discussion of the political climate surrounding the 2002 Farm Bill. Currently in Washington there — continued on page 44
ists powerful, bipartisan support for at least capping direct payments, led by ag-friendly Senators Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Byron Dorgan (D-ND), as well as President Bush. This, coupled with widespread public sentiment against direct agricultural subsidies and the likelihood that such payments will soon be deemed in violation of international trade agreements, makes the debate leading up to the 2007 Farm Bill a perfect time to discuss creative ways to redirect all or part of those payments.

While Bibee’s assertion that food stamp advocates have to date not been instrumental in setting national farm policy is true, describing them as being “not well organized” or lacking in political access is inaccurate. They simply focus on the wrong issue: ending hunger (a problem affecting perhaps 10 million Americans) instead of promoting healthy diets, which between 50 and 210 million Americans could have benefited from in 2000. Were food stamp advocates to begin lobbying for a U.S. food and farm policy rooted in health promotion and equal access to affordable, healthful foods among low-income consumers, as opposed to continuing their single-minded focus on ending hunger, they would no doubt become one of the most powerful constituencies influencing the 2007 Farm Bill debate.

What I want to read: articles on sustainable agriculture, conservation, water issues and other types of agriculture than the current conventional (i.e., chemical/pesticide) methods. I would like to see more articles on research facilities, plus articles geared to consumers.

Dennis Bell
Redlands, Calif.

I like to learn about innovative scientific discoveries made by UC researchers that make California agriculture more efficient.

In your January-March 2006 issue, I particularly liked the Outlook discussion on the 2007 Farm Bill. You do not find this type of conversation in the regular media. I encourage you to do follow-ups on how the major issues are resolved, and why the decisions were made.

One of America’s major potential problems is the giant increase in the number of overweight/obese citizens. Josh Miner’s thought-provoking proposal to use money from the commodity support funds to create price-lowering incentives has great merit. It is obvious that America must change its eating habits.

Finally, California Agriculture used to feature quality stories on youth and the community. I suggest that you restart coverage of California’s 4-H program. Telling how the UC DANR/4-H system is helping California youth grow into responsible citizens would be powerful.

Don MacNeil

Conveyor belts for grape harvest

After reading of all the problems picking grapes (“Smaller loads reduce risk of back injuries during wine grape harvest,” January-March 2006), I picture a traveling gondola car with three belt conveyors attached. This would eliminate all of the tubs and half of the pickers. The grapes would be placed directly on the conveyor belt and end up in the gondola.

James Demin
Glendora, Calif.