



Photo/Don Cameron

Employees of Terranova Ranch in Fresno County await COVID-19 vaccinations. More than 100 farm employees received their first dose of the vaccine during an event at the ranch.

## Vaccination rollout starts to reach farms

By Kevin Hecteman

Slowly but surely, COVID-19 vaccinations are finding their ways to farm employees—but farmers and agricultural professionals around the state say they know the work is just beginning.

Don Cameron, who runs a diversified farm in Fresno County, hosted a vaccination event last week that saw 113 people receive the first dose of a vaccine against COVID-19.

“We felt really good about getting it done, and our workers were really proud to,” Cameron said, noting that another event to deliver the second dose is being set up for the end of February.

Ryan Jacobsen, chief executive of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, said another vaccination event occurred earlier in the week in Mendota, noting it was “the first of many more events to come in the

month ahead.” He said he hopes vaccine supplies “will continue to increase over the coming weeks, so that we can continue to have an increase in these types of events.”

In the meantime, Jacobsen said, the county Farm Bureau is “encouraging farm employers to talk to their employees about the vaccination, about the shots, so that they are prepared and knowledgeable on the subject when it does become a reality for most farm employees throughout the area here.”

In Monterey County, where spring planting season will soon ramp up, the county Board of Supervisors heard a presentation last week from the Monterey County Farm Bureau and other agricultural organizations about plans to get vaccines to farm employees.

“We are partnering with our fellow ag

organizations to develop the program,” said Norm Groot, executive director of the county Farm Bureau.

Just getting the word out about the vaccine, and dispelling misgivings and misinformation surrounding the shots, is a big task. In Monterey County, Groot said, this will take the form of public-service announcements in Spanish on local radio stations, as well as information disseminated to agricultural employers to be shared with employees.

“There’s a certain familiarity with a lot of the employees already, because we do flu-shot clinics annually with a lot of the larger employers,” Groot said. “We’re hoping that we can build upon that and use that as the example that this is just another way to protect your health and ensure the safety of the community.”

As part of the effort, Groot said, several of the county's largest farm employers have agreed to host vaccination sites.

The San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau is part of a county task force planning and coordinating vaccine distribution.

"We appreciate San Luis Obispo County, the way they have specifically included agriculture," county Farm Bureau Executive Director Brent Burchett said. "They solicit our opinion. They ask for farmers and ranchers to give feedback."

Getting vaccines to people in an effective manner will likely mean breaking the agriculture category down into smaller, targeted groups, Burchett said.

"I think working through the farm labor contractors, working through some of these bigger food companies, some of these vegetable producers that may have a crew of 100 people—let's work through them to try to get big numbers of farmworkers vaccinated as soon as possible," he said.

Burchett said the county Farm Bureau surveyed its members and heard from more than 150 agricultural employers.

"We identified about 6,000 people currently in the county that will need the vaccine," he said. "The county, at least in San Luis Obispo, has been very good about setting up logistics infrastructure to ad-

minister the vaccine. The choke point is, of course, the supply of vaccine coming in."

In the meantime, the task force is reaching out to farm employees in their native languages.

"Our farmworker task force members have been having webinars specifically in Spanish or Mixteco to educate (and) let people ask questions about it," Burchett said. "We want to make sure that as much information as possible is getting out there before the vaccine."

The Mendocino County Farm Bureau has been working with the county to streamline the vaccination process, Executive Director Devon Jones said.

"The challenge with doing a blanket outreach was that the county didn't know how much vaccine was going to be made available specifically for agricultural workers, so they couldn't give me any numbers," Jones said.

The county Farm Bureau has been working on "a primary list of contacts for our farm labor contractors and several of our larger employers in the county, with mostly the vineyard industry, to provide to the county so that they can directly work with them if necessary," she said. "We've also provided all of our membership, through our e-letters, with the contacts at the county, including their

Facebook page, their online website and their email and phone-call portals that they have made available."

Cameron, who manages Terranova Ranch in Fresno County, said at the pandemic's onset last year, the farm implemented measures such as temperature checks, staggered start times and wiping down common surfaces.

"We've been talking to our workers for a couple of months now about how important it is, if we get the opportunity, to get vaccinated," he said. "I think the important part is, these guys are going to go tell their friends, 'Look, I didn't have any problems—my shoulder was sore for a day or two, but that was it'—and relieve some of the fear that the farmworker community has."

Vaccine supply will be critical, he said, but at least things are moving.

"It's great to see the farmworker community getting vaccinated," said Cameron, who also serves as president of the California State Board of Food and Agriculture. "These guys have been out there keeping the food on the table for California and the nation, and they tend to get overlooked many times."

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