



## Conference Introduction

**Lori Berger, California Specialty Crops Council**

**Morgan Doran, University of California Cooperative Extension**

The importance of California agriculture cannot be overstated: with nearly \$37 billion in annual cash receipts, California production dwarfs that of Texas and Iowa, which rank second and third, each with around \$19 billion.

Despite its size, the ag industry is changing: the number of California farms and ranches has shrunk in the last 10 years to 75,000 from 87,000, while land used for agriculture dropped 2 million acres to 26.2 million.



In citing these statistics, Morgan Doran, University of California Extension farm advisor for Solano County and Western SARE California state coordinator, said he sees several issues that must be addressed to sustain the state's agriculture. These include water quality and quantity, land use/conversion, ag infrastructure, regulations (California, he said has the most highly regulated ag of any state), labor, energy costs, succession, profitability and the state's perilous financial situation.

Doran made his comments in painting a picture of his state's agriculture during the Western SARE California Subregional Conference in Visalia December 1-3, 2009.

Lori Berger, chair of the conference site committee and executive director of the California Specialty Crops Council, in welcoming conference participants, observed that her hometown of Visalia exemplifies what's happening in California and Central Valley, and how growth is impacting agriculture. She said Visalia's population, just 60,000 some 20 years ago, has mushroomed to 150,000 today, with growing neighborhoods bumping against agriculture.

Berger said the California Specialty Crops Council, which represents nearly 20 crops, is among many entities working to bring people together to sustain agriculture.



“I believe across the board that growers want to sustain the environment,” said Berger. “We need to create bridges to bring all elements, large and small, together for the betterment of agriculture. The status quo isn’t going to work. We need to be creative and we need to be collaborative.”

Doran and Berger played key roles in planning the conference along with the Western SARE staff and Hunter Francis of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Pete Goodell, UC-Kearney Ag Center and Tom Tomich, UC-Davis Sustainable Ag Institute. Also assisting were Western SARE Administrative Council members Rick Melnicoe of the UC-Davis Western IPM Center and Stacie Clary, nonprofit representative.

The conference, the sixth of seven Western SARE conducted in its expansive region, brought more 70 key players in California’s agriculture industry to Visalia to share SARE’s successful funded grant projects. Twenty-seven posters, a sampling of the 124 grants funded in California since SARE began in 1988, showcased project results.

The conference was designed to ask participants what issues they see as critical for sustaining and promoting California agriculture. To elicit that input, participants pondered six “burning questions,” sharing their ideas at facilitated and recorded roundtable discussions. A total of 450 separate comments were recorded, and the priorities emerged through consensus.