

Ag Digest

Compiled from staff reports

IN BRIEF

Rabobank ranked No. 1 agriculture lender in U.S.

Rabobank has been ranked as the top commercial agricultural bank of 2005 in Ag Lender magazine's annual list of the "Top 100 Ag Banks" in America.

The No. 1 ranking was determined by Ag Lender according to the criteria used by the U.S. Federal Reserve to define an "agricultural bank."

According to the Federal Reserve, an "agricultural bank" has at least 17 percent of its outstanding loans to farmers and ranchers.

Rabobank, N.A.'s loan portfolio is comprised of approximately 40 percent outstanding loans to U.S. farmers and ranchers.

Association encourages produce on menus

The Produce Marketing Association is actively working with the National Restaurant Association and the Culinary Institute of America to integrate more produce on restaurant menus.

PMA is sponsoring the meeting of the NRA's Nutrition Study Group at PMA's Foodservice Conference & Exposition in Monterey, July 14-16.

State organic advisory committee has vacancies

California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura has announced six member and four alternate vacancies on the California Organic Products Advisory Committee.

The 15-member committee advises the secretary on current issues related to organic food production.

Appointments will be for three producer, one environmental and two technical representatives with alternate vacancies available for one consumer, one technical and

two producer representatives.

The environmental, technical, and consumer representatives must not have a financial interest in the direct sale or marketing of organic products.

Nominations can be mailed to CDEA's Organic Program, 1220 N St., Sacramento, CA 95814 or e-mailed to Rgreen@cdfa.ca.gov.

Information: Ray Green, (916) 445-2180, ext. 3506.

DPR launches new air quality initiative

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation launched a comprehensive pesticide initiative on May 30 to improve air quality statewide.

The initiative targets air toxins and smog-producing chemicals from pesticide emissions and will achieve state air-quality goals by 2008 and set a national standard.

The initiative focuses on:

- Reducing emissions from fumigants.
- Reformulating other pesticide products to reduce emissions and risks.

- Developing strategic pest management partnerships in concert with industry.

Online: www.cdpr.ca.gov.

CALENDAR

6/23-25 | 73RD ANNUAL SAN BENITO COUNTY SADDLE HORSE SHOW AND RODEO, Bolado Park Fairgrounds, Tres Pinos, 7 p.m. June 23, 1:30 p.m. June 24-25. \$7-\$10. 628-3545.

ONGOING | OLDTOWN SALINAS MARKETPLACE, Saturdays, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., 100 block of Main Street, Salinas. 424-7611.

ONGOING | MARINA'S CERTIFIED FARMERS' MARKET, Sundays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monterey-Salinas Transit Center, 280 Reservation Road, Marina. 384-6961.

AG DIGEST appears weekly in Ag Monday. To submit a news or calendar item, send it in care of AG MONDAY by e-mail to newsroom@gannett.com; by fax to 754-4293; or by mail or in person to The Salinas Californian, PO Box 81091, Salinas, CA 93912. Photos of people are welcome, in color or black and white. Information: 754-4260.

Grass-fed beef: Is it trend or fad?

Some ranchers say there's a market for it

By PHILIP BRASHER
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Tom German of Holstein, La., stopped growing corn and soybeans seven years ago, seeded his land to grass and did something that's a near sacrilege in the heart of the Corn Belt.

He started raising and fattening beef cattle without feeding them a kernel of corn. German's cattle eat nothing but grass.

Nationwide and in Iowa, virtually all beef cattle are fattened on corn, often in large feedlots of 1,000 head or more. But German is among a tiny but growing band of farmers who are feeding demand from consumers who think grass-finished beef is healthier and better for the environment.

Beef from cattle that are raised on grass is typically lower in saturated fat and contains small amounts of the

heart-healthy Omega-3 fatty acids mostly found in fish.

"That stuff is resonating with some people. They're coming looking for people like us," says German, who sells 300 to 400 grass-fattened cattle a year.

Pasture-based cattle producers like German are about to get some help from the government: The U.S. Agriculture Department is going to allow grass-fed beef to carry a special USDA seal verifying that the meat is from cattle fattened only in pastures.

USDA scrapped an earlier proposal that would have allowed cattle to get as much as 20 percent of their diets from corn and still be labeled as grass-fed.

Advocates of grass-fed beef say that rule would have allowed big beef processors to label corn-fed beef as grass-fed.

The new proposal will require a diet of 99 percent grass. Farms will be inspected annually, at their own expense, to get the USDA seal. Even producers who don't want to use the USDA seal may still be required to comply with the 99 percent requirement to label their

beef as "grass-fed," officials say.

"It's going to more clearly establish what the standard is for grass-fed, and it's a high standard," says Todd Churchill, who runs the Minnesota-based Thousand Hills Cattle Co., which supplies grass-fed beef to supermarkets and restaurants in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

Some major natural-foods supermarket chains, including Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, have started selling grass-fed beef, much of it imported.

Grass-fed beef "is a fad right now. It's growing," said John Lawrence, an agricultural economist at Iowa State University. "The question is how big will it get."

Beef industry officials see grass-fed beef as a legitimate niche market but object to the meat being considered healthier than corn-fed.

"We certainly support people having that choice. Our primary issue and concern is where people make unsubstantiated health claims," said Gary Weber, executive director of regulatory affairs for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association

TIPS

Preparing grass-fed beef

- Steaks should be cooked rare or medium rare. For people who prefer well-done, grass-fed beef should be cooked at low temperatures in a sauce to add moisture.

- Grass-fed beef is low in fat, so coat the meat with virgin olive oil, truffle oil or a favorite light oil before cooking.

- Because it is low in fat, grass-fed beef requires 30 percent less cooking time. Remove the beef from the heat source when the meat is 10 degrees below the desired temperature. It will continue to cook after it is removed from the heat.

- Before roasting, sear the meat to lock in the juices and then place in a pre-heated oven. Reduce the temperatures by 50 degrees or cook at the lowest heat setting in a crock pot. Cooking times will be the same or slightly shorter at the lower temperature.

- Don't use the microwave oven to thaw grass-fed beef.

Source: American Grassfed Association

WHO HAS THE IN BLACK?



Photos.