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5 Questions: Farmology

This unique California program aims to connect consumers to agriculture.

By Kindra Gordon

If you eat food and wear clothes, you are involved in agriculture – and that is what a California group hopes to remind consumers through their educational venture called Farmology.

Farmology, which means the study of farming, is a consumer education program run by the Agricultural Awareness and Literacy Foundation, a 501(c)3 non-profit founded by California Women for Agriculture in January 2001. California Women for Agriculture is the largest, all volunteer agricultural organization in California with over 3,500 members in 22 chapters.

Denise Skidmore, of Merced, CA, is current president of the Agricultural Awareness and Literacy Foundation Board of Directors. Here she shares her involvement with the Farmology effort and the goals for the program's future.

How did you get involved with Farmology and why is this an important effort to you?

I have always had a passion for sharing the critical story of agriculture and was a founding member of Farmology. I was not raised on a farm and was fascinated, through 4-H and FFA, by the complex system that fulfills the most basic of our needs. Without a secure supply of food and fiber, our nation is at risk.

I enjoyed nine years as a Mobile Dairy Classroom Instructor for Dairy Council of California taking a live cow and calf in a specially designed truck and trailer to provide outdoor assemblies to schools in LA and the Bay area and personally spoke to more than 500,000 children.

Currently, I serve as the Director of Education & Public Relations for Hilmar Cheese Company overseeing the Visitor Center tour program hosting more than 15,000 students and thousands of adults each year.

Our goal with Farmology is to focus on educating consumers about the benefits and importance of American agriculture.

What are some of the educational tools Farmology has developed?

The Farmology restaurant booklet was one of our first projects – we figured what better place to learn about farming than while waiting for a meal. With our partnership with California Grown, we have distributed more than 200,000 booklets.

We are also revising our Farmology website to become a consumer place to learn how crops and livestock are produced and processed. We recognized that there isn't really one place to go to learn about farming – you have to go to each different commodity board's site. So our revised Farmology.com site will bring all of that information to one place and provide links to all of the great virtual tours that different companies host on their sites. We plan to launch the improved website this fall.

What else lies ahead for your group?

Our biggest project is our Farmology Traveling Exhibit. If \$150,000 would 'just fall from the sky,' it would debut next year at National Ag Day celebrated at the California State Capitol and then travel to fairs, museums, farm days etc. for the next few years.

Once the exhibit becomes reality, we expect that more than 100,000 people will experience the exhibit each year.

Our hope with this exhibit is to show the science and reason behind many of today's modern livestock equipment. For example, a squeeze chute – if you look that up on the Internet; the only place you can find out how it is used is on PETA's website. We [ag industries] need to be explaining our equipment and how it is safe for both animal and rancher.

What kind of feedback have you gotten from the Farmology efforts; do you believe that you are making a difference with consumer attitudes toward agriculture?

So far, the Farmology efforts have been well received. We are making a difference. The Farmology booklet has been evaluated by users and we are working on a measurement for the parents. We will be doing user evaluation of the revised website at the end of this year. We have built in a formal evaluation process for the traveling exhibit to measure consumer opinions before and after as well.

The Agriculture Awareness and Literacy Board is a group of dedicated women, and we work hard to get our key message out – that agriculture benefits everyone.

What advice do you offer other states on developing a program like Farmology?

We need to all work together. We need messages that all commodities (conventional and organic) endorse and promote – such as Buy California Grown (or American grown/made); farms and ranches provide open productive landscapes; and produce healthy, nutritious food and fiber, flowers, forests, fuels and pharmaceuticals all that contribute to our daily lives.

For more information visit the group's website at www.farmology.com.