

## **One More Overlooked Piece of California's Infrastructure**

By Kevin Cann, Member of the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors and Former Chair of the Rural County Representatives of California



The current spate of wildfires highlights the utility of one of California's most under-appreciated assets: our system of "county fairs". Now, you may be thinking, what does the State have to do with "county fairs"? Over 140 years ago, California began organizing what is known today as the Network of California Fairs consisting of 79 fairs that operate under a variety of governance structures, including 52 active state institutions known as District Agricultural Associations (DAA). The day-to-day operations of the facilities fall under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA).

Fairground facilities provide more than cotton candy, corn dogs and Ferris Wheel rides, they are emergency operations centers, temporary housing for persons who have been evacuated and/or lost their home, secure housing for horses, livestock and other animals during emergencies, and most importantly, a staging facility for firefighting crews and equipment.

Like so much we take for granted in the Golden State, fairground facilities have not had sustaining investment for years, sometimes decades. Sadly, there are no plans to do so. In fact, the State is seeking to shut down or otherwise dis-invest from them even while utilizing these spaces to protect the health and welfare of firefighting crews doing battle in the current, disastrous fire season.

The Governor must do more to preserve these critical state facilities. But instead he is asking CDFA to begin the process of "off-loading" these critical community assets. In some respect, this is the natural culmination of years of State disinterest in maintaining the facilities and the people who depend on them. In fact, state funding has been largely eliminated and CDFA staff involvement in providing oversight was also significantly reduced. Fairs responded to these reductions with deferring needed maintenance and a debilitating atrophy of a critical community-based facility.

It is important to note that the Legislature in 2017 recognized the distress fairs were experiencing and provided an opportunity for them to receive a portion of the proceeds from sales taxes collected at fair events. While this funding has been collected for a couple of years, it is unforgivable that these funds have not been released to the fairs! Similar to so many enterprises, with the onslaught of coronavirus (COVID-19), fairs have had to cancel events. Collectively, fairs lost approximately \$98 million through June 2020, while still having to perform as COVID surge and evacuation centers as has been the

case in my own Mariposa County. Instead of pushing out these sales tax dollars as quickly as possible, CDFA has put in place a cumbersome process by which a fair must jump through hurdles to obtain these monies.

The State, meanwhile, is pushing the burden of identifying new fair governance structures back onto counties rather than undertake a reinvestment plan. This lack of State leadership is disheartening, short-sighted and, fundamentally irresponsible when you consider the importance of fairground facilities in combating wildfires.

Fortunately, those threatened by the wildfires have been able to utilize the network of fairs during past years and especially the past two devastating weeks. I am afraid if the State does not provide a viable investment plan, these facilities may not be available to meet the “call to action” next year when we see another round of ferocious fires.

What then?

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