

Farm Bureau History

"It's up to us to organize. No one can do it for us. See to it that your Farm Center endorses the State Federation at its next meeting. If the farmer does not demand a square deal no one is going to do it for him."

A few weeks after those words appeared in the September 1919 edition of the Monterey County Farm Bureau Monthly, delegates from 32 county Farm Bureaus met in Berkeley to create the California Farm Bureau Federation.

The fledgling organization, with a combined membership of 24,168, elected Dr. W.H. Walker of Willows as its first president and occupied two rooms within Hilgard Hall on the University of California campus in Berkeley.

The university and its Agricultural Extension Service prompted the founding of the Farm Bureau movement in California.

Created by Congress in 1914, the extension service operated through the nation's land grant colleges, including UC. Before extension staff could bring the service's education programs to a county, the service was required to establish a farm organization within the county. That guaranteed a channel through which county farm advisors and extension specialists could reach individual farmers and their families. A county Farm Bureau representing at least 20 percent of the farmers in the county had to be operating before a farm advisor could be appointed for the county.

The first California county to qualify was Humboldt, which formed its Farm Bureau in 1913. The following year, Yolo, San Joaquin and San Diego counties founded their Farm Bureaus.

B.H. Crocheron, the founder of California's Agricultural Extension Service, promoted the formation of county Farm Bureaus and, eventually, the state organization as well. In a circular written in 1917, he envisioned the county Farm Bureau acting as "a sort of rural chamber of commerce and... the guardian of rural affairs. It can take the lead in agitation for good roads, for better schools, and for cheaper methods of buying and selling."

But, Crocheron added, those functions were not the key to local Farm Bureau success: "Perhaps the Farm Bureau can help to buy cheaper and better seeds, can help to boost the local socials, can encourage the faltering school teacher, can get out and talk for good roads—but its first and surest function is to increase the local knowledge of agricultural fact."

Farm Bureau retains to this day a close association with the extension service, but it also became clear to early organizers that Farm Bureau should pursue a broader agenda as well. Because the university could not participate in those extra activities, organizers decided to separate the Farm Bureau from the extension service. That was accomplished with the founding of CFBF on Oct. 23, 1919, when its constitution and bylaws were officially adopted.

Three weeks later, the American Farm Bureau Federation was founded at a meeting in Chicago, with California among the 31 states given voting privileges at the first meeting.

Initial dues to join CFBF were \$1 per member, plus 50 cents which went to AFBF. Dues were raised to \$2 in June 1920; four months later, California followed an AFBF recommendation and raised its dues to \$5 in conjunction with other state Farm Bureaus.

The basic structure of Farm Bureau remains intact: a grassroots organization where policy making begins at the county level.

In the early years, the local farm center formed the basis of Farm Bureau life. At the peak of the farm-center system, in 1923, some 568 farm centers operated within the 42 existing county Farm Bureaus. As transportation systems improved, allowing farmers to travel more widely to meetings, the number of farm centers decreased. But a few farm centers remain in operation today.

The state organization, meanwhile, began assembling some of the basic functions it still performs. In 1920, CFBF formed a Law and Utilities Department to represent farmers' interests before California's courts and commissions. In 1921, a Publicity Department was created and a statewide edition of Farm Bureau Monthly began publication. In 1922, an Organization Department was formed to encourage membership.

CFBF also worked from the beginning to help farmers earn higher returns from their crops. From 1921 until 1924, for example, the CFBF Exchange acted as a cooperative grain-marketing organization.

In an effort to improve the quality of life in the state's rural areas, the early CFBF also established a Farm Home Department. A university study in 1933 described the purpose of the department as "to assist the farm family to maintain an adequate standard of living by supporting home-demonstration work and by exchanges of experiences in homemaking."

Farm Bureau also showed an early interest in providing farmers with low-cost insurance coverage. As early as 1925, the organization formed a committee which endorsed the creation of county mutual companies to provide rural fire insurance. For a brief time in the late 1920s, CFBF and county Farm Bureaus offered an automobile insurance discount to members.

Eventually, Farm Bureau decided to expand its insurance offerings, launching an insurance company in 1948. Farm Bureau now offers insurance benefits to its members through a partnership with Nationwide Insurance.

Obtaining low-cost workers' compensation insurance was also a key concern for Farm Bureau members. Several county Farm Bureaus arranged blanket policies for farm employers. CFBF began offering a statewide program in 1943, and now offers workers' compensation insurance through a partnership with Nationwide.

Farm Bureau membership dipped during the Depression years of the 1930s, bottoming out at 15,270 in 1932 before recovering slowly the rest of the decade. The organization moved its headquarters three times during the '30s, moving twice on the UC campus, then off-campus in 1938 to offices on Allston Way in Berkeley.

The postwar years of the late 1940s brought a boom in Farm Bureau membership, which nearly tripled during the decade. As membership increased, CFBF moved into the former Federal Land Bank building on Berkeley's Fulton Street in 1946, initiating an extensive remodeling project—including the addition of three floors—which it completed in 1950.

The 1940s also saw the establishment of CFBF's Young People's Program, now the Young Farmers and Ranchers program. Designed as a service to help young agriculturalists succeed in the business and to train new generations of Farm Bureau leaders, the YF&R program began in 1947.

Communicating with members and the general public has always been a key Farm Bureau function. County Farm Bureaus were publishing monthly newspapers for members even before the statewide organization was formed, and the Farm Bureau Monthly remained the organization's main publication into the 1970s. The weekly newspaper Ag Alert® began publication in 1974 and has since become the most widely read and respected agricultural publication in California. In 1977, Farm Bureau began producing a publication for its associate members, California Country, which was upgraded to a full-color magazine in 2000. In 2011, the magazine was refocused and renamed California Bountiful, promoting understanding between farm and city with colorful features, recipes, gardening tips and more.

Farm Bureau also recognized early the benefits of broadcast communication. CFBF sponsored radio programming during the 1920s. The organization returned to the radio business in 1950, launching the Voice of Agriculture over the 12-station California Farm Network. CFBF produced radio programming for 47 years and today operates the Food and Farm News service which provides news briefs to media outlets statewide.

CFBF began producing television programs in 1964, with a weekly program also titled Voice of Agriculture. The program began as a combination of in-studio guests and educational films before evolving into a newsmagazine format in the early 1980s. Retitled California Country in 1996 and then California Bountiful in 2011, the program now reaches viewers on stations and cable systems throughout California, plus a nationwide audience via the RFD-TV satellite service with a lively, 30-minute weekly format featuring stories on the people, places and lifestyles that have made California the nation's largest food-producing state.

Farm Bureau's communications efforts took a new direction in 1996, when the organization launched CFBF.com, providing news and information about Farm Bureau and California agriculture. Separate websites for Ag Alert, www.agalert.com, and California Bountiful, www.californiabountiful.com, offer full content of the newspaper, magazine and television program. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest accounts allow Farm Bureau and California Bountiful to communicate with members and the larger social media community in real time.

Throughout its history, Farm Bureau has remained a flexible organization, adding new functions when needed by its members and discontinuing other programs to reflect changing times.

Sparked by unionization drives and other labor unrest, CFBF delegates approved creation of the Farm Employers Labor Service in 1970. The service provided farm employers with labor-relations advice and group legal services. Following passage of the state Agriculture Labor Relations Act in 1975, FELS expanded its staff to include field representatives working in eight regions of California and Oregon. A wholly owned subsidiary of Farm Bureau, FELS has expanded to offer a wide range of personnel management services.

As California's population grew during the 1960s and '70s, Farm Bureau saw the need to assure adequate representation for farmers and rural residents on the state's elected bodies. In 1976, CFBF

formed a political action committee, FARM PAC®, which supports candidates who understand agriculture.

In fact, the increased awareness of the need to deal directly with legislators and government agencies prompted Farm Bureau to move its offices to the state capital, after 60 years in Berkeley. CFBF had operated since 1961 from offices on Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue, but in 1979 relocated to offices on Exposition Boulevard in Sacramento. In 1997, the organization moved into offices at 2300 River Plaza Drive, just northwest of downtown Sacramento, and relocated nearby in June 2019 to its current offices at 2600 River Plaza Drive.

The continued urbanization of California brought a sobering realization to farmers: Many people had no idea where their food came from or what was necessary to bring that food to their tables. That realization brought a creative solution. CFBF created an Agriculture Education Program in 1980, to incorporate agriculture into the regular curricula of the state's elementary and secondary schools. Reorganized in 1986 as the California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom, the program provides classroom materials and training for teachers.

To cultivate a better understanding among Californians of the many benefits that rural landscapes provide, Farm Bureau created the California Bountiful Foundation in 2010. The foundation supports agricultural research, education and public outreach.

Inviting a new generation of members, Farm Bureau created a new membership category in 2011, serving students between the ages of 16 and 25. The collegiate membership category became available for students enrolled in a post-high school education program such as a community college, four-year university or trade school.

Throughout its history, the California Farm Bureau Federation has maintained a reputation for innovative programs aimed at one goal: providing the best possible services available to farmers and rural residents.