

# All Access

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Understanding the Social Impact of  
California Fairs

2010

**An annual report produced by the Blue Ribbon Foundation  
with support from CDEFA's Division of Fairs and Expositions**

# Letter From Foundation Chair

## Dear Fellow Californians:

California's vast network of 78 fairgrounds offers much more than cotton candy, carnival rides and corn dogs. It represents a cherished institution that is a source of generosity, compassion and community strength 365 days a year in every corner of California.

Despite this fact, fairs rarely have the opportunity to tout the tremendous value they contribute to the fabric of our state, cities and towns.

Fairs need to do better job of telling their stories, especially those that demonstrate their virtues: the compassion, generosity, diversity, charity, safety, humanity and other values they bring to their communities. That's why the Blue Ribbon Foundation has embarked on an exciting new project called "All Access: Understanding the Social Impact of California Fairs."

This online publication showcases some the more compelling and positive stories taking place at fairgrounds throughout California. In the years to come, this annual report will serve as an ongoing reminder to the public and continue to foster a greater appreciation about the profound, intensely personal impact fairs have on every community in California.

The funding for this project was provided in part by the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Division of Fairs and Expositions. This project focuses on California fairs, but each and every fair has important social impact for their communities and their stories should be preserved and collected when possible.

Sincerely,



Tawny Tesconi  
Chair, Blue Ribbon Foundation

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**Aiding** Ty and his family find support at the Siskiyou Golden Fair

**Liberating** Alameda County Fairgrounds is one of eight U.S. places where Iraqi expatriates can vote

**Thriving** A first generation Mexican-American entrepreneur operates a successful fair concession business

**Supporting** The Imperial Valley Expo jumps into action after an earthquake

# VETERANS

FIND SANCTUARY AND SERVICES AT STAND DOWN

**“A community is often judged by how well it takes care of its own. Serving those who have served our nation is the primary goal of the East Bay Stand Down.”**

**F**or too many American war veterans, any notion of normal has been left behind in the theaters of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. They now spend their days in civilian life haunted by war and often feeling abandoned in their own country.

Homeless. Jobless. Restless.

But every two years, there is one place that they can go to find peace—the Alameda County Fairgrounds, which serves as a sanctuary for Northern California vets in need of wide-ranging legal and social services.

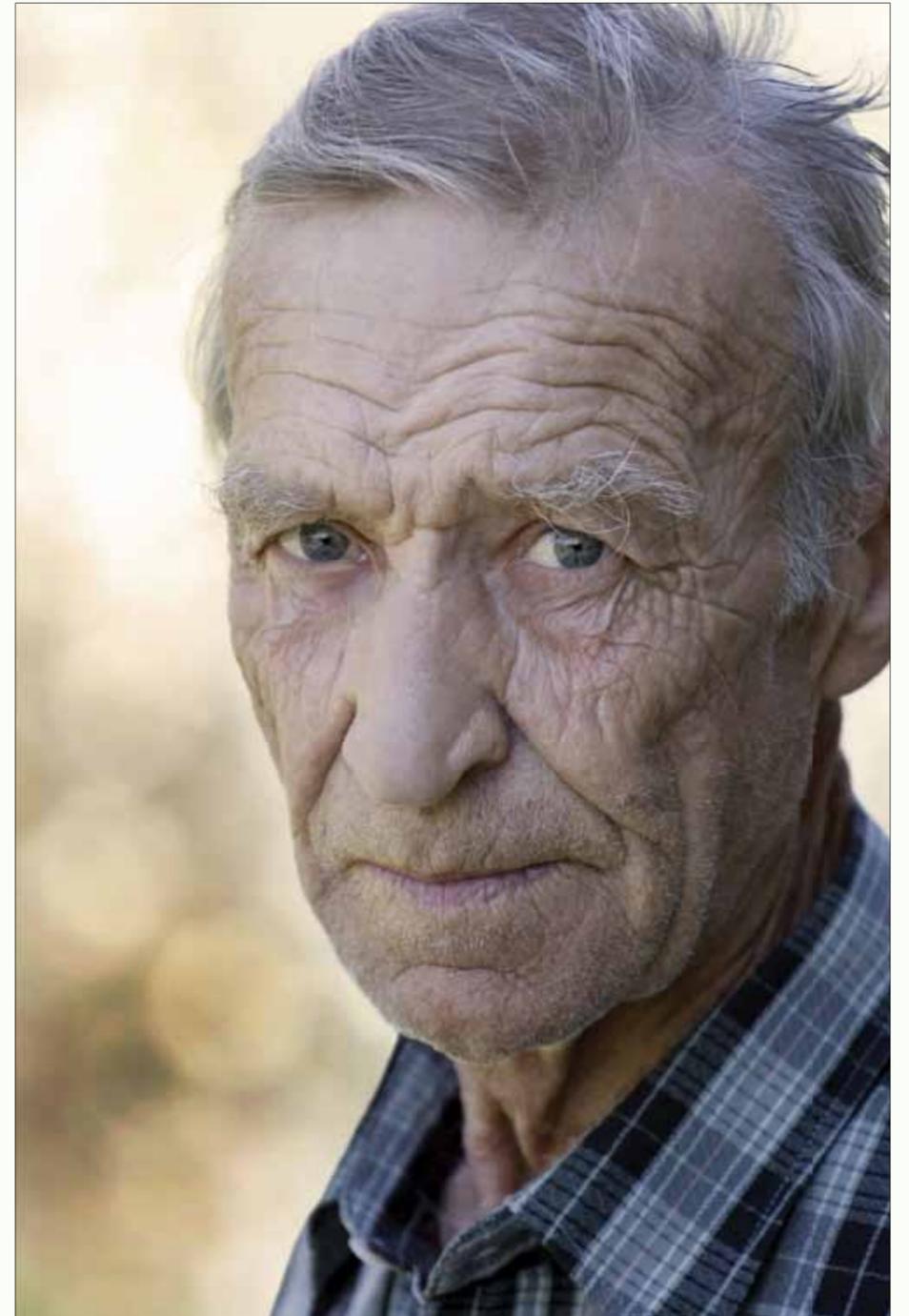
Stand Downs are a national phenomenon, with 200 cities taking part annually. They were originally held at military bases, but due to security issues since the September 11 terrorist attacks, many of the Stand Down events have had to relocate.

The Alameda County Fairgrounds has embraced the opportunity to fill the void in Northern California, where an estimated 15,000 needy and homeless veterans live.

This past year, more than 900 area veterans took part. They were given safe shelter. Dentists and doctors provided free health care. The vets received new clothes and help with writing resumes and finding employment. They connected with social services and benefits.

“We treat the veteran participants with respect and dignity,” according to the fair organization. “Their former service to our nation is evidence of their ability to succeed and is also reason enough for our community to support them in regaining success.”

In recognition of its efforts, the fair has been presented with the United States Armed Forces Humanitarian Service Award.



# 1<sup>st</sup> CERTIFIED

## GREEN FAIRGROUNDS IN CALIFORNIA

**“As a major public gathering place in our community, we have the opportunity to inspire a large number of people to learn about earth-friendly initiatives. We also serve as a national model of what a county fair and community can achieve.”**

**I**nspired by the County of Marin’s goal of creating a sustainable future, Marin County Fair Manager Jim Farley envisioned a fair and fairgrounds that incorporated environmental stewardship into every aspect of its operations.

That vision is now a reality, with a solar-powered carousel and stage; bio-fueled rock n’ roll shows; compostable plates, cups and utensils; and wind-powered lighting.

The Marin County Fair, aka the Greenest County Fair on Earth, was the first fair to become certified as a green business in the San Francisco Bay Area. It continues to be an industry leader in implementing comprehensive initiatives to “green” county fairs—from renewable energy and energy efficiency to waste diversion and water conservation. The Marin County Fair strives to incorporate sustainable business practices not just during fair time, but year-round.



# 28 TONS of FOOD

DONATED IN ONE DAY FOR FARM WORKERS  
AND OTHER DROUGHT VICTIMS

**B**y the autumn of 2009, western Fresno County had been transformed into a drought-blighted wasteland of Dust Bowl proportions. Entire orchards wilted from lack of water. Peach trees tipped over. Grapes shriveled on the vine. Alfalfa fields were disked under.

But the Drought of '09 reserved a special brand of cruelty for the local economy—wiping out thousands of jobs for predominantly Spanish-speaking farm workers and the barbershops, grocery stores, restaurants and gas stations they patronized.

In towns like Huron, Firebaugh and Mendota, everyone was making tough decisions: “Do I pay my rent or utilities? Buy medicine for my baby or food for my family?”

Amid this perfect storm, the Big Fresno Fair came forward with a big idea: Hold a one-day food drive. Free fair admission in exchange for canned goods. The Salvation Army, Community Food Bank, Latino Rotary and Univision stepped up as partners.

The day of the event, a steady stream of people stood in lines a half-mile long. Before sundown, 65,000 people had donated more than 28 tons of canned corn, green beans, refries, fruit cocktail and the like—enough to feed 43,300 people. Some say it was California’s largest single-day food drive ever, and further testament to the lifeline fairs play in their communities.

“People involved in fairs always have a big heart and are willing to give a hand up to people in need,” said Captain Dwaine Breazeale, who oversaw the food drive for the local Salvation Army. They are special people and are all about what this country was built on—caring and generosity.”



**“Fairs always have a big heart and are willing to give a hand up to people in need. ”**

# \$52

**The per-pound value**  
of a pig auctioned to raise money for a 15-year-old  
cancer victim

**F**rom the other end of the telephone, the 15-year-old boy battling cancer could hear his hog soar. Bid on and thrown back out three times throughout the 10th District Junior Livestock Auction at the fairgrounds of the Siskiyou Golden Fair.

When the dust finally settled, the hog had fetched \$12,825—or about \$52 per pound (figuring in other contributions). It was a pretty sum to fight an ugly disease. The money was used to help Ty and his family pay for medical bills and travel costs to an Oregon hospital where he was receiving treatment for his lymphoma.

The outpouring of generosity was overwhelming, but typical of this tight-knit community and the type of charitable work fairgrounds are involved with on a regular basis.

“I’d really like to thank the fair board and everybody who was involved in that whole process just to let them know that we appreciate it so much. Ty is halfway through his treatment and things are looking really, really good,” the boy’s mom told the local newspaper last year.

Things are even better now. Ty is considered cancer free and doing what teenage boys should be doing—learning how to drive, working as a lifeguard, playing football and enjoying life.



**“The community really comes together to help youth. It was pretty incredible and very emotional for everyone who was there.”**

– Dena Rizzardo, auction president

# 1,900 IRAQIS

cast votes for parliamentary elections this year

**“Fairgrounds are used for so many reasons outside of entertainment and benefit the community in all sorts of ways, including political events.”**

– Raymond George,  
director of Northern California’s  
polling station for Iraqi Americans

**T**he color of freedom isn’t red, white and blue for many Iraqis living in the United States. Rather, it is purple, the color of the ink left on their index fingers as proof they voted in Iraqi parliamentary elections.

For the second time since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s brutal dictatorship, Iraqis have been free to cast votes in a democracy. And for the second time, the Alameda County Fairgrounds in Pleasanton provided the venue for this historic event—one of only eight locations in the United States where Iraqi expatriates could vote.

From throughout the western states, hundreds of Iraqis arrived with children, flags and unbridled enthusiasm.

“It’s our country that’s why,” said a proud Turlock resident, Edward Youkhanna, as he explained the importance of the day to a local television reporter. “We voted for our country.”



# 24

## The number of fairs

where Lola Ramirez sells her authentic Mexican food each year

**“I’m 100 percent  
reliant on the fairs.”**

—Lola Ramirez,  
owner, J.L.Q. Concessions

**L**ola Ramirez’ recipe for success has always included two essential ingredients: fish tacos and California’s fairs.

Without them she says, she would probably still be struggling as an importer of blankets, toys and gift items.

But back in 1999, Lola had an idea—why not try to sell authentic Mexican seafood at the Los Angeles County Fair?

The fair manager bit on the novel idea.

“I was able to show that I had something uniquely different to sell,” said Lola, a first-generation Mexican-American entrepreneur, who operates a successful concession business for seven months a year at fairs as far north as Chico to as far south as Imperial. “We had just a little bit of money, but it was enough to buy an ugly little truck and get the business started.”

Now, Lola’s immensely popular Pepe’s Mariscos Mexican food stands can be found at 24 California fairgrounds throughout the year. At any given time she has a dozen employees, usually college students or those with temporary work visas.

“We have three trailers and business is great,” says Lola, who notes the ripple effect fairs have throughout the economy. “I’m 100 percent reliant on the fairs, which the people I do business with for my food and supplies are too.”



7.2

## The magnitude

**of the Mexicali Earthquake that shook Southern California and Mexico over the Easter holiday**

**F**or help, local and international relief agencies immediately turned to the biggest asset in the region—the Imperial Valley Expo Center.

State fair officials quickly made sure the fairgrounds were safe enough to serve as an emergency staging center. Then everything swung into motion.

The Red Cross, California Emergency Management Agency and the Fire Department set up operations to coordinate transportation for relief supplies—including untold pallets of drinking water. In the face of ongoing aftershocks, fair personnel worked tirelessly alongside volunteers and relief agencies to load and reload supplies.

Responding to emergencies, no matter how big or far away, is just one of the unheralded ways California fairgrounds offer stability in crisis. They don't ask what's in it for them. They just do it. Like true Americans. Like true, unsung, California heroes.

**“It was phenomenal how such a small fair could play such a big role in meeting the emergency needs of Imperial Valley and Mexico following this earthquake disaster.”**

– Theresa Garcia,  
interim CEO, Imperial Valley Expo Center

