

# Contra Costa County Agriculture and Weights & Measures Newsletter



## Winter 2012

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This is a part of a series of quarterly newsletters designed to inform growers in Contra Costa County about issues important to the Agricultural community. We welcome your questions and comments about any topics in this newsletter as well as suggestions for future newsletters. Contact us at:

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## Unusual Quarantine Interceptions

Every day, shipments of plant material and live animals are brought into California by way of package delivery services such as UPS, Fed-Ex, and others. These shipments can contain nursery stock, fruit, vegetables, cut flowers, seeds, bulbs, firewood, hay, animals, etc. They also can contain exotic plant pests, diseases and weeds that threaten California's agriculture and natural environment. The Contra Costa County Department of Agriculture sends Biologists daily to local UPS and Fed-Ex facilities to inspect these shipments.

The sheer variety of plant and animal shipments that enter California in this way can be mind boggling. Although most shipments originate inside the United States, some come from foreign countries. When Biologists open a package for inspection, they sometimes don't know just what

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**A shipment of kola nuts found at Fed-Ex by a Contra Costa County canine inspection team.**

kind of strange plant, fruit, vegetable, or leaves they are looking at. If there is no invoice or other documentation that identifies it, the Biologist may have to get help from the CDFA laboratory in Sacramento, a California Fish & Game Warden, or the University of California.

Most of the time, senders don't realize they are violating the law. California has the strictest plant quarantine laws in the nation and shippers often don't think to check what is required to get their products into the state legally.

An example of a shipment with very serious pests was intercepted by one of our canine inspection teams at the Concord Fed-Ex facility. Bart detected an unmarked box that contained about 15 pounds of cut branches, foliage, and grasses. It had been shipped by a business in Miami, Florida that specialized in voodoo and other occult religious supplies. There was no invoice on or in the box identifying what the contents were or where they had been grown. The plant material appeared to have been collected from the wild and was infested with a variety of live insect pests.

Samples of the insects and plants were sent to the CDFA diagnostic laboratories. Among the 92 samples submitted were 17 different live exotic insect species of concern and 3 live plant species of concern that are not known to occur in California. One of the insects was the Little Fire Ant. It is native to central and south America and has invaded Hawaii where it causes serious



**Bart with his "voodoo" find.**



**A Tahitian lei from Hawaii found at the Concord Fed-Ex.**

problems to both agriculture and homeowners. The ant's sting is extremely painful and causes long-lasting intense itching. The Little Fire Ant climbs into trees and shrubs where it builds nests. If disturbed, it rains down in large numbers stinging skin and eyes and getting under clothing. It has been reported that in heavily infested areas, agricultural workers can't prune or harvest crops because of this pest.

Some shippers know very well that their shipment is illegal and try to sneak it through anyway. Parcels containing marijuana are often detected by the canine inspection teams. County Biologists simply write a Notice of Rejection for failure to properly mark the shipment and identify where the marijuana leaves were grown, then report the find to the authorities.

A few shippers just keep on trying to send their illegal plant material no matter how many times they get caught. A really determined shipper from Hawaii was caught six times over a two year period sending Tahitian leis to various addresses in Concord. The leis were repeatedly found to be infested with serious exotic insect pests.

Live animals can also be a threat to agriculture, people, and the environment. Many types of

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**An African Pygmy Hedgehog found at the Concord UPS facility.**

mammals, birds, insects, etc. are prohibited or restricted in California for various reasons. They might be an endangered species, a hazard to agriculture, or a threat to public health and safety. They could harm the environment by infesting, preying on, or competing with native species. They might even carry diseases and parasites that could attack livestock or native wildlife.

Commercial suppliers and individuals often ship animals by way of package delivery services. Most of these animals are permitted in California as long as the shipment is properly marked and identified. Biologists regularly see legal shipments of snakes, lizards, frogs, spiders, scorpions, crickets, worms, fish, etc. UPS and Fed-Ex have policies that restrict or prohibit shipping certain types of live animals so it is best to check their requirements beforehand.

Rarely, prohibited live animals will be intercepted by County Biologists at a package delivery service. An example is a three month old African Pygmy Hedgehog found during an inspection at the Concord UPS facility. He was shipped in an unmarked box by a private individual from Washington. The hedgehog was turned over to a California Fish & Game Warden and later adopted by a local zoo. Both the shipper and receiver were cited for importing a prohibited animal.

## **Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano**

Are you looking for a tax write-off in 2012? If so, consider donating your extra fruits and vegetables to the Food Bank of Contra Costa & Solano. They are looking for fresh, clean fruits and vegetables and, in many cases, will come to your facility to pick them up. The Food Bank is happy to accept surplus produce from packing sheds, harvested fields, and Farmers' Markets.

The Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano has served the community for over 35 years. They provide food to more than 132,000 hungry people in need every month and distributed 12.6 million pounds of food in 2010. Through the Farm 2 Kids program, more than 9,000 children in 80 after school programs receive 3-5 pound bags of fresh produce each week.

Many large growers in east Contra Costa County already donate produce to the Food Bank on a regular basis. If a grower has a large quantity of produce to donate, the Food Bank may be able to send a truck to pick it up. Growers can call the Food Bank to see if their driver is planning to make a pickup in the grower's area. If so, the Food Bank will be happy to add another stop to their route.

If you are interested in donating, call Jim Morris at (925) 676-7543 or Galen Stockdale at (925) 771-1317. The Food Bank also has drop off locations at their warehouses in Concord at 4010 Nelson Ave. and in Fairfield at 2339 Courage Dr., Suite F. Call (925) 676-7543 for hours or go to their website at [www.foodbanksccs.org](http://www.foodbanksccs.org)



**Charitable donations of produce are a good tax write-off.**

## Yellow Starthistle Control

Yellow Starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*) is a highly invasive weed from Eurasia that was inadvertently introduced into California around 1850. It is common in rangeland, hay fields, pastures, roadsides, wild lands, and other open areas. Yellow Starthistle currently infests between 10 and 15 million acres in California.

Yellow Starthistle is a long-lived annual with a deep, vigorous taproot. Seeds are produced at levels as high as 30,000 seeds per square meter and can remain viable in the soil for 3 or more years. It prefers dry areas with high light levels and colonizes rapidly, forming dense infestations which quickly deplete soil moisture. Yellow Starthistle is poisonous to horses, causing a nervous disorder called “chewing disease”.

Seeds germinate during the winter rainy season and produce a small basal rosette on a taproot that can extend up to 3 feet into the soil. This deep root allows Yellow Starthistle to out-compete shallow-rooted plants during the drier summer months. During late spring to early summer, the plants produce blue-green, branching stems from 6 inches to 5 feet in height. The stems and leaves are covered with white, wooly hairs. Mature plants produce bright yellow flowers with sharp spines surrounding the base.

Control of Yellow Starthistle is a multi-year process that requires control of the current population, suppression of seed production, and



**Yellow Starthistle is a serious problem in most parts of Contra Costa County.**



**Clockwise from upper right: rosette, bolting, mature plant, flower.**

revegetation with desirable plant species. It is also important to eliminate the artificial spread of the weed from seed contamination in hay, crop seed, livestock, equipment, soil, etc.

There are two species of weevils and two species of flies that have been introduced in California as biocontrol for Yellow Starthistle. They feed only on Yellow Starthistle and will not attack crops or native plants. All four attack the flower and/or seed production and are present in Contra Costa County. However, they can only reduce seed production by up to 50% and should not be used as the sole method of control. Although a rust disease that attacks Yellow Starthistle has also been tested here, it isn't clear yet whether it will prove to be an effective control.

There are several cultural methods that are helpful when managing Yellow Starthistle infestations. Cultivation of the soil done when the soil has

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dried out after the last rains can help control seedlings. However, if rain occurs after soil cultivation, it may be necessary to cultivate again to eliminate newly germinated plants.

Grazing and mowing can be used to reduce seed production. Sheep and cattle will eat the early stages of Yellow Starthistle before spines form on the plants. Goats will eat the plants both before and after spines form. Intensive grazing in late spring and early summer can reduce plant height and seed production. Overgrazing should be avoided since it will reduce the ability of desirable grasses to recover and help shade out the Yellow Starthistle.

Mowing works best if it is done when the plants are first starting to flower. If mowed too early, the plants regrow from recovering branches and flowers will develop below the mower cutting height. If mowing is done too late, seed production will have already occurred. Mowing is most effective when the soil is dry and no rainfall or irrigation will follow.

Burning is sometimes used as a control method. It is best done after the rainy season when flowers first appear. By this time, most desirable plants have already shed their seeds. However, it may be difficult to get the necessary burn permits.

Revegetation is an important part of managing infestations. Desirable plant species will compete with and shade out Yellow Starthistle. It is best to choose plants that grow well, are



**Goats are especially helpful when using grazing as a Yellow Starthistle control method.**



**Aerial pesticide treatments are very effective for Yellow Starthistle in rangeland areas.**

well suited to the area, and are not invasive themselves. Before revegetation, it may be necessary to reduce heavy Yellow Starthistle infestations prior to overseeding with desirable species. After they become established, desirable species must be managed carefully to encourage their growth.

Both postemergent and preemergent herbicides are available to control Yellow Starthistle. Postemergents work best on seedlings while preemergents act to prevent germination. Yellow Starthistle has a very long germination period so a single application of a postemergent herbicide is unlikely to provide effective control. Postemergents are best applied late in the rainy season. However, larger plants may be more resistant to the herbicide. Preemergents must be applied before seeds germinate and should have a long residual action in order to be effective.

Both Clopyralid (Transline®, etc.) and Aminopyralid (Milestone®) are herbicides that combine both preemergent and postemergent action. Clopyralid has a shorter residual period and should be applied January to March. Aminopyralid can be applied from December to March due to its longer residual action.

For more information on Yellow Starthistle control, see the U.C. IPM Yellow Starthistle guidelines at <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7402.html>

## A Consumers Guide to Taxicabs

The first documented service offering vehicles for-hire began in Paris in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, taxicabs have been common in cities all over the world. The first mechanical taximeter device used to calculate passenger fares was invented in Germany in 1891. In the 1980's, electronic versions of the taximeter were introduced and have continued to be used to this day.

A taximeter works by measuring both time and distance traveled. Distance is measured in fractions of a mile using a sensor attached to the vehicle's transmission. This sensor is the same one that provides information to the vehicle's speedometer and odometer. The taximeter uses the sensor's information and the fee rate for distance to calculate the mileage portion of the fare. If the vehicle's speed drops below a certain level, the fee rate switches from a rate per distance to a rate per time. In this way, the total taxicab fare consists of an initial fee (also called the first drop), plus a fee for the distance the taxicab traveled, plus a fee for the amount of time the taxicab spent in slow traffic and/or waiting at other stops before the final destination.

Most taxicabs have a minimum of two rate schedules: one for "in-town" travel and another for "out-of-town". Companies may also add additional fees such as bridge tolls, surcharges applied to trips to an airport, etc. The fare amount shown on the taximeter, including extra fees, must be constantly displayed, lit at night, and easily read by a passenger in the back seat.



A typical taximeter.



**County Inspectors can test taximeters in several different ways. Using a dynamometer allows very accurate test results.**

California law requires taxicabs to conspicuously post information on all their various fare rates and extras. This includes the distance and time rates for the taximeter, the first drop fee, the local tax rate, and the schedule of extra fees. The posted sign must be: displayed inside the front and rear passenger compartments; readily understood by the ordinary passenger; and either on a permanent material or protected by glass or plastic.

Taximeter brands and models must be tested by the California Division of Measurement Standards and given "type approval" before they can be used in California. Only service agents licensed by the State of California can install, adjust, or repair taximeters. To prevent tampering, the service agent will attach a lead and wire security seal over the taximeter's adjustable elements after working on it.

Once taximeters are installed and at regular intervals afterwards, they must be tested and approved by a County Weights & Measures Inspector. Testing includes a check of the taximeter's accuracy at measuring both time and distance. Taxicabs can be tested using a measured mile course, a fifth wheel attached to the back of the taxicab, or with a dynamometer. Taximeters that have passed the testing will have a conspicuously displayed county seal bearing the year of inspection and the county's insignia.

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Most taxicab drivers are honest but, as in any business, there are some who try to defraud customers. A common scam is to charge an incorrect rate. In 2010, a study by New York City officials showed the city's taxicab drivers overcharged passengers by more than \$8 million over a two year period by charging them out-of-town rates for trips inside the city limits. However, this type of overcharge, as well as others, can be detected by the watchful consumer.

### **Tips to remember when riding in a taxicab:**

Use only taxicabs from licensed companies. Don't use an unmarked vehicle claiming to be a taxicab.

Be sure there is a lead and wire security seal as well as a paper county seal visible on the taximeter. The year marked on the paper county seal should be from either the current or the previous year.

Take a moment to review the posted rates. If the rates are not clearly posted, choose another taxicab.

The driver should turn the taximeter on at the start of the trip and turn it off when reaching the destination.

The fare shown on the taximeter when it is first turned on should be the same as the posted first drop amount.

The rate schedule shown on the taximeter should be correct for the type of trip (in-town rates apply when the trip begins within the city limits).

The driver should take the most direct route to your destination. Know approximately how much the trip should cost beforehand. If the driver charges you a lot more than that amount, ask him/her why.

You have the right to ask for a written receipt.

If you feel you have been overcharged, report it to your County Weights & Measures Department. When calling, please have the name of the taxicab company, the taxicab number, and the vehicle's license plate number.

## **Contra Costa County Yesterdays**

The San Ramon valley got its name from a land grant of over 20,000 acres given by the Mexican government to Jose Maria Amador in 1834. The land grant, named Rancho San Ramon, stretched from modern day Danville in the north all the way to Dublin to the south. In 1851, Amador sold over 4,000 acres of his land grant to Leo Norris. Thomas Bishop then acquired 3,000 acres of the Norris land in 1895 and established Bishop Ranch.

At first, Bishop Ranch raised hay, grain, sheep, and cattle. Around 1910, they started to grow walnuts and pears, then later planted peaches, prunes, grapes, and tomatoes. One of their pear orchards covered 300 acres. To make shipping easier, Bishop Ranch built a large warehouse and shipping shed on a spur of the Southern Pacific railroad tracks. Their Bartlett pears were sold all over the world.



**A pear fruit crate label used by Bishop Ranch.**

San Ramon remained a quiet farming community until interstate highway 680 was built in the mid 1960's. After that, the town grew quickly. In 1970, Western Electric bought 1,733 acres of the old Bishop Ranch to build housing, stores, and light industry. In 1978, Sunset Development bought a 585 acre parcel and built the Bishop Ranch Business Park.



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