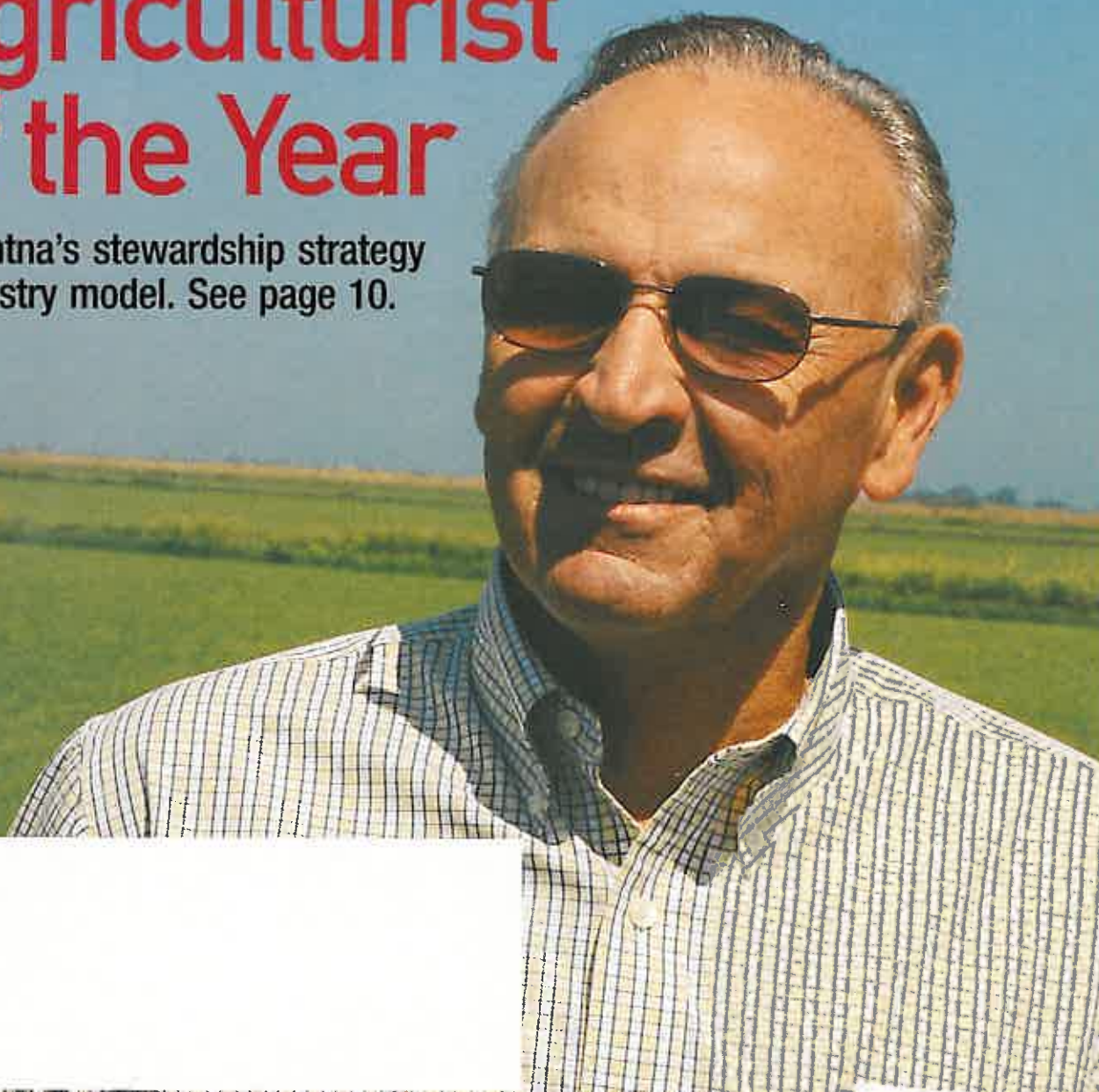


# CALIFORNIA FARMER.

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## Agriculturist of the Year

Al Montna's stewardship strategy  
is industry model. See page 10.





# Trust engineer

Building trust wins Al Montna Agriculturalist of the Year. ■ By Kathy Coatney

**O**utstanding leadership, service, a visionary—these terms have been used over and over to describe Al Montna, a rice grower in Yuba City and the 2004 Agriculturalist of the Year.

Al is all that and more, says John Kautz, chairman of Ironstone Vineyards in Murphys. Kautz is a past winner of the Agriculturalist of the Year award, and he served with Montna on California Department of Food and Agriculture's (CDFA) State Board of Agriculture.

the state's agricultural foundation.

Says Veneman of Al, "He is credited amongst his peers as being the visionary who led a 1990s industry effort to reach out to environmental and conservation activists by inviting them to work with the rice industry on a stewardship strategy that has become a model for others."

## TRUST LEADERSHIP

Montna's leadership in the late 1980s as chairman and board member of Farmers Rice Cooperative and the California Rice Industry Association helped make the rice industry the "poster child" for environmental stewardship in agriculture.

This was achieved through the phasedown burning of rice stubble, reducing pesticide runoff into the Sacramento River by 90%. Hundreds of thousands of acres were created as a seasonal wetland for waterfowl, shorebirds and wildlife through

Montna's efforts.

Al's strength, sincerity, and overall credibility as a spokesman for agriculture demonstrates his leadership abilities, says Lee Ruth, president emeritus of the Agricultural Council of California, a trade association that represents most of the agricultural cooperatives in California.

"I think special attention ought to

be given to the role that he played as far as making Farmers Rice Cooperative a leading marketer of rice," Ruth says.

"Certainly all rice growers in California have benefited financially from the leadership that he provided in this arena," Ruth adds.

Montna has also served as chairman of the Feather River State Bank, on the California Bay-Delta Authority, the State Board of Agriculture. In addition he was chairman of the Ag Advisory Council of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and in 1996 was named Alumni of the Year by Cal Poly's College of Agriculture.

Kautz says that Montna's ability to bring people together and his contributions have benefited all of agriculture, not just the rice industry.

David Guy, executive director for the Northern California Water Association (NCWA) based in Sacramento, says, "Al follows through. He makes things happen." Montna is a founder and seven-year board member of NCWA.

## Recent past winners

- 1990 Dick Markarian
- 1991 Gordon Van Vleck
- 1992 Richard Rominger
- 1993 Leland "Lee" Ruth
- 1994 William McFarlane
- 1995 Henry J. Voss
- 1996 Guido Lombardi
- 1997 John Lacey
- 1998 John Kautz
- 1999 Gertrude "Gertie" Zehring
- 2000 A. J. Yates
- 2001 John De Luca
- 2002 Cecil Wetsel
- 2003 USDA Secretary Ann M. Veneman

Presentation of the award will take place at the California Exposition & State Fair Gala on Aug. 13 at Cal Expo, Sacramento. This prestigious award, established in 1980 by the California State Fair, recognizes leadership in agricultural finance, government, production agriculture, education, labor, research, communications, trade and/or public service. Past recipients are true pillars of



"I think it was really his vision that led to the creation of Northern California Water Association. It obviously took a lot of leadership from many others around the valley, but he was the spark that really created the organization," Guy says.

Montna has worked extensively behind the scenes on behalf of California agriculture. During the state's 1986-1992 drought, he led Northern California rice growers' efforts to voluntarily transfer water to the State Department of Water Resources, saving businesses and valuable tree crops throughout Southern California.

He owns and operates Montna Farms where he raises specialty short grain rice, walnuts and organic walnuts. He's involved in a partnership that operates an additional 2,300 acres, and he is also a partner in American Commodity Co., a worldwide rice marketing company that dries and stores rice.

## INDUSTRY CHANGES

Growing up in the rice business, Montna has seen tremendous changes occur. The industry has gone from using relatively archaic equipment to a very high-production, capital-intensive industry, he says.

Also during this time, Montna has seen water usage reduced by half or more, production per acre go up twofold and a vast improvement in rice quality through varietal development. "We're much more skillful marketers today than we were," Montna says.

Part of the industry's evolution has been to become involved at the local, state, national and international level. "I would say that the rice industry, as a commodity group, is probably one of the most proactive and result-oriented in the country," he adds.

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO) have become an issue for the

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rice industry. "I would speculate that eventually GMO will be very acceptable, but I think not until we get our customers comfortable. We'll have to go through working out those issues with them to make sure we don't violate any of their major concerns," Montna says, adding he's confident the industry will succeed at doing that.

Montna expects rice cooperatives to remain strong. "We've had a vast growth of independents in Califor-

nia, and there's always been quite an independent industry in the South. We have two major co-ops in the South, both in Arkansas, and then we have a very strong co-op here in California. I think that will continue."

world, we have the sustainable markets, increasing markets worldwide for the highest-quality medium grain rice in the world, outside of Japan. Some will argue as good or better than the rice in Japan, and I agree with that," he says.

"Medium grain is a very specialized product, and the Sacramento Valley is one of the best places in the world to raise it, so I think there's a bright future for agriculture, especially rice, in the North Valley. We have the infrastructure, and the agri-

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—Al Montna, Agriculturalist of the Year

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#### LOOKING AHEAD

The future of agriculture lies in the hands of our children, Montna says, but the funding for agriculture programs like Future Farmers of America (FFA), 4-H and other agricultural programs is at risk.

"The rural communities have to really emphasize and encourage young people to participate in those programs, and encourage the educators to maintain the programs," Montna says.

This needs to be done at a state level as well, Montna continues. "We need to encourage the administration and the legislature to fund those programs and make sure that they're available."

The youth are our seed corn, our future, Montna says. "We have to have a ready supply of those individuals coming along."

Montna expects the California rice industry to remain strong. "We have the most innovative growers in the

cultural base and resources to support it," Montna says.

"There are a lot of good leaders in agriculture, but Al is definitely at the top of the list," Guy says.

Strong leadership also means standing up for the good of the industry, something Montna has done time and again.

"I've always believed that you stand up and fight heavily for what you believe is right," Montna says. "You have to let others win also, and there has to be something in it for everybody, but when you believe in it, you have to stand up and fight for it."

Montna's ability to communicate what is right and his low-key "demonstrating by doing" skills have changed attitudes about agriculture through stewardship action and coalition building that has inspired trust by environmental organizations and the media. Montna's direction of agriculture trust building alone makes him worthy of this great honor.

"He led the transformation of that industry [rice] into what many consider to be agriculture's poster child of environmental stewardship," concludes CDFA secretary A.G. Kawamura. ♦

*Coatney is a Corning farm writer.*