

2016

JIM KUHN LEADERSHIP AWARD

*California Alfalfa & Forage Association,
Representing the Alfalfa and Forage Growers of California*

Tom Ellis

Farmer, Grimes, CA

The Board of Directors of the California Alfalfa & Forage Association (CAFA) is very pleased to select Tom Ellis as the 2016 recipient of the Jim Kuhn Leadership Award.

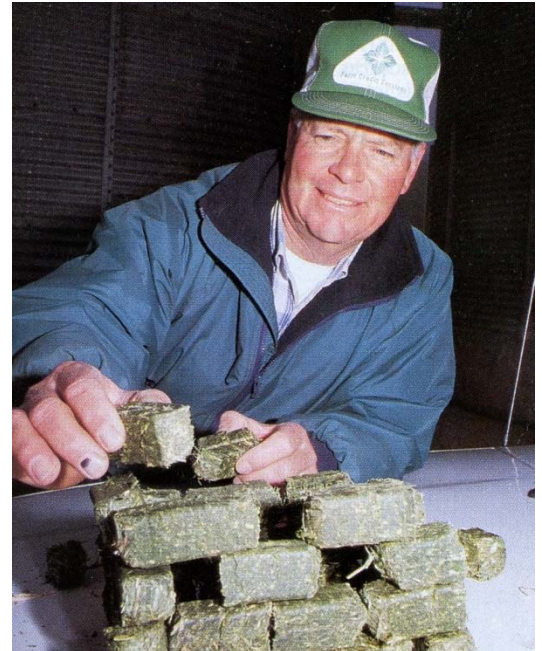
The Jim Kuhn Leadership Award is presented annually to a person or organization for their lasting contributions to the California alfalfa industry. The award was established in 2005 when Kuhn, an industry icon and forage innovator, was killed in a vehicle accident near his ranch in El Centro, CA. Nominees are judged on their knowledge of alfalfa, record of leadership and the extent and depth of their contributions to the California alfalfa industry.

Tom was born in Woodland, CA of parents Doc and Rose, who farmed almonds in Dunnigan. Tom's grandfather John McAravy owned a dredging operation which in the early 20th Century McAravy participated in the development of agriculture in the Sacramento Valley and Delta region. That was a harbinger of Tom's long interest not only in agriculture, but in water issues and flood control. He graduated from UC Davis in 1961 (and was commencement speaker), where he learned about a new machine being developed for handling alfalfa hay called a 'cuber'.

After a stint in the army, Tom returned to his life-long passion: farming. Since that time, Tom Ellis has been an innovative farmer and leader for the California alfalfa industry. As a farmer, he was an early adapter of the mobile cubing concept in the 1960s, since the machines were developed by farmers in Woodland, CA area and later by John Deere. Tom started custom cubing, later growing his own crop. After the major companies abandoned the manufacturing of new machines in the 1980s, Tom kept the idea alive by maintaining these machines and continuing to supply high quality cubes destined for dairies and export from his Sacramento Valley Farm,. He continued to utilize mobile cubers until 2014 on his ranching operation.

He was an early leader in the San Joaquin Valley Haygrowers Association, serving as a board member for 15 years and as chair for 3 years. This Association is 77 years old, is the largest hay marketing cooperative in the United States, and markets more than 50,000 acres of hay crops.

Tom was one of the early leaders and founders of the California Alfalfa & Forage Association, serving as its first president and remaining as a board member until 2016. He participated (along with Jim Kuhn, Philip Bowles, Dan Putnam, Joe Rominger, Norm Yenni, and Mel Coelho) in a meeting with Marc Reisner in 1997 in Sausalito, CA, which prompted the development of



CAFA. Mr. Reisner (now deceased) authored the 1993 book ‘Cadillac Desert’ – a fascinating review of western water development and woes – which was nevertheless quite critical of alfalfa as a ‘water waster’. Reisner named alfalfa one of the ‘CRAP Crops’ (cotton, rice, alfalfa, pasture) which he wrote has had a tremendous impact on western water, at the expense of the environment. The counter argument (articulated by Tom Ellis, Jim Kuhn and others) was that alfalfa not only contributes a tremendous amount to food production, but also to environmental and soil health. Reisner eventually came to agree with this perspective, but his question during this encounter was ‘where has the alfalfa industry been all these years?’ in their response to these critiques. This led to a decision by the founders of CAFA to form an association to articulate a farmer’s perspective: “In Order to be heard, One must have a Voice” – as Jim Kuhn said in a 1997 Symposium presentation. Tom reiterated this theme in 1998 and again in 1999 articulating the need for leadership.

Since that time, Tom and CAFA has taken leadership on wide ranging issues such as the registration of herbicides and insecticides to the concept of weed-free hay, the arrest of a farmer for baling at night, GMO crops, the importance of the wildlife and environmental contributions of alfalfa, and the importance of research to the alfalfa industry.

Tom has taken particular leadership on explaining this crop to a skeptical public. He was the key leader to spearhead the ‘Alfalfa and Wildlife –The importance and benefits of Alfalfa in the 21st Century’ published in the early 2000s (See <http://agric.ucdavis.edu/files/242006.pdf>). He also helped to organize trips to the CA state capital to discuss alfalfa issues, and participated several times in walk-throughs at the US capital on behalf of alfalfa growers for the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance (NAFA).

Tom has given a number of presentations at the California and Western Alfalfa Symposia. This included participation in a 1994 presentation on stand establishment, a presentation on alfalfa & wildlife (1996), a presentation on weed-free hay (2000), and the first announcement of the formation of the CA Alfalfa and Forage Association at this symposium in 1998 and 1999. His leadership is also represented by his talk ‘Why the Alfalfa Industry Should reach out to a Non-Ag Audience’ in 1999, which he worked closely with Jim Kuhn to develop. He has also been a big supporter of UC Cooperative Extension, working with local Advisors and statewide programs.

Tom has taken particular interest in other agriculture issues such as flood control; and given his farm’s close proximity to the Sacramento River and its levies, this is no surprise. He has been quite active in Farm Bureau and local Water Association efforts to represent agricultural perspectives in important land management issues, especially assuring that farming interests are considered when modifications are made to a levy.

Tom’s intellect, interest, studiousness, and passion for all issues agricultural (and alfalfa) are impressive to all that meet him. Tom’s selfless contribution of time and energy to help formulate the CA Alfalfa & Forage Association, his passion and depth of understanding about alfalfa issues, and his ability to follow through make him a richly deserving recipient of the 2016 CAFFA Jim Kuhn Award for leadership in the Alfalfa Industry. The board joins the hundreds of alfalfa growers in California to honor Tom’s selfless service to the alfalfa industry.

Tom and his wife Rose-Ann Ellis live in Grimes, CA

-- Dan Putnam, UC Davis and Rick Staas, SJ Valley Haygrowers Association