

2021

JIM KUHN LEADERSHIP AWARD

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

Rick Staas

*President and CEO, San Joaquin Valley Hay Growers Association and Alfalfa Industry
Leader*

It is with great pride that the California Alfalfa & Forage Association has selected Rick Staas for the Jim Kuhn Leadership Award in 2021.

The Jim Kuhn Leadership Award is presented 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 and to rural communities.



Figure 1. Rick Staas (second from right) discusses drought conditions in California with SJV Haygrower VP Norman Beach (right) and haygrowers Nancy Bell and son Ryan Bell of Bell Farms in Gustine, CA, during the 2015 drought.

Rick Staas fulfills the ‘leadership’ role in spades. For 40 years of his working life he has worked for the San Joaquin Valley Hay Growers Association first as staff, then as president, the largest single marketing cooperative for hay products in California, if not the USA. The SJV Hay Growers have been one of the largest hay marketing cooperatives in the world, with over 80 years of success.

The Hay Growers Association was founded in 1940 by a group of visionary growers who saw the strength in marketing hay as a group. This member-financed company provides numerous benefits to members, including payments every two weeks, prices usually above the state average, quality testing and evaluation, and a guarantee that members will actually be paid by buyers. The latter is important in a ‘wild and wooly’ industry where one bad transaction can ruin one’s day if not a year of profits. The staff, led by Staas, are highly experienced in understanding hay markets and quality and the role of various forage crops for different classes of animals. They are deeply familiar with the subjective and lab evaluation of hay quality and price. The SJ Hay Growers markets up to 400,000 tons of hay and forage crops per year in California and neighboring states and even internationally. Their primary markets are the state’s

\$7 billion/year dairy industry, the largest of any state in the USA. Greater than 90% of California's alfalfa hay is marketed commercially (vs. on-farm production), with most of it tested in laboratories.

Since 2002, Rick Staas has managed the Hay Growers organization as president/CEO with a keen sense of business but also a sense of personal worth and family values. This management approach has been widely appreciated by employees, members, and customers. As SJVH Vice President Norman Beach says *"He has a really tough stance in business, but has a huge heart personally"*

"I really enjoy working with our grower members, who are a great group of people," Staas says. "We've been through a lot of good times and bad. Having a good relationship with our customers is equally important and it takes an understanding of both sides to succeed."

"Additionally, I think one of the most important reasons for success is the quality of our employees who have been with us in most cases more than 20 years. Their dedication adds tremendous value"

Although not a haygrower himself, Rick has a deep understanding of what it takes to produce a high-quality hay product on California ranches. He has led efforts to standardize hay quality testing in California and the US. He works closely with grower-members in the San Joaquin Valley to improve production methods and market their hay. He was a founding member of the California Alfalfa & Forage Association and helped to write the by-laws in 1996, which represents haygrowers statewide. He has supported research efforts through the California Alfalfa & Forage Research Foundation, and worked cooperatively with University of California scientists on pest management, production issues and quality analysis.

His sense of history informs his current success and vision for the Association in the present. In a tribute to the founders of the cooperative, Rick wrote:

"Having been with this company for 40 years, I have been around long enough to have experienced many ups and downs for our growers. As I looked through the historical records from the past 81 years, I was and still am in awe of the foresight of those who founded this company. The continued success of the San Joaquin Valley Hay Growers Association is a great tribute to the uncanny vision these individuals had at a very uncertain time for themselves and other alfalfa growers. Somehow they saw something that no one else did and joined forces to create an organization that grew quickly and has remained the marketing leader in the California alfalfa industry since its inception."

Of course, Rick Staas has built upon this success with his own contributions in an environment of shrinking acreage and ever-increasing economic pressures on farmers. Rick took over leadership of the Cooperative from Mel Coehlo, also a leader in the industry and a 2008 CAFA Kuhn Award winner. Rick Staas lives with his family wife Leanne, Ricky, Wyatt and Ava in Tracy, CA and enjoys sports, trips with family to the beach, motorcycling, in addition to continuing his life-long career in the successful marketing of hay crops.

---Dan Putnam, UC Davis

California Alfalfa & Forage Association Jim Kuhn Leadership Award Recipients

(Complete biographies of these Kuhn Award recipients can be found at:
<https://www.calhay.org/jim-kuhn-award.html>)

- 2005 – Jim Kuhn, Farmer, Seeley, CA (awarded posthumously)
- 2006 – Dr. Vern Marble, UC Cooperative Extension Alfalfa Specialist, UC Davis, CA
- 2007 – Mick Canevari, UC Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor, Stockton, CA
- 2008 – Mel Coelho, Director, San Joaquin Valley Hay Growers Association, Tracy, CA
- 2009 – Tim Hays, Pest Control Advisor, Lancaster, CA
- 2010 – Seth Hoyt, ‘The Hoyt Report’, Ione, CA
- 2011 – Steve Orloff, UC Cooperative Extension Farm Advisor, Yreka, CA
- 2012 – Joe Machado, Sales Leader, America’s Alfalfa, Los Banos, CA
- 2013 – Harry Cline, Editor, Western Farm Press, Fresno, CA
- 2014 – Dr. Larry Teuber, Alfalfa Breeder, UC Davis, CA (awarded posthumously)
- 2015 – Dr. Mark McCaslin, President, FGI International, Minneapolis, MN
- 2016 – Tom Ellis, Farmer, Grimes, CA
- 2017 – Dr. Daniel H. Putnam, UC Cooperative Extension Forage Specialist, UC Davis, CA
- 2018 – Duane Chamberlain, Yolo County Farmer
- 2019 – Philip Bowles, Merced County Farmers, Los Banos, CA
- 2021—Rick Staas, San Joaquin Valley Haygrowers Association, Tracy, CA