HOW COMPETITIVE ARE CALIFORNIA'S SPECIALTY CROPS?

You may not realize it, but every time you eat a salad or a slice of fresh blackberry pie, whip up some guacamole or sample a strawberry, you're enjoying a specialty crop. And when it comes to specialty crops, California is king: specialty crops make up more than 80 percent of the value of the state's agricultural production.

But it isn't all baby arugula and organic blueberries. Specialty crops include timber, lettuce, grapes, nuts, avocados, fruit and more — any crop not subsidized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

And just how is the specialty crop industry doing in California these days?

That's what the California Institute for the Study of Specialty Crops at Cal Poly is charged with finding out. The institute, headed by agribusiness Professor Jay Noel, was founded in August 2003 with a $2.8 million grant from the California Department of Agriculture.

The basic mandate of the institute is to research public policy and economic issues that affect the competitiveness of California specialty crops and conduct education and outreach efforts about specialty crops, Noel explains.

To that end, the institute has funded 18 research projects through grants ranging from $16,000 to $140,000. Results from several are online at the institute's Web site (www.cissc.calpoly.edu), and the rest will be published there at a later date.

Some of the institute's research has already made headline news. Its study on farm-labor costs has been cited in regulatory debates in California and Florida. A recently released study on a dramatic rise in timber harvest costs in California is being discussed from Sacramento to Boston, where the state of Massachusetts is looking to revamp its forestry policy.

YOU WIN SOME; YOU LOSE SOME

The attention has subjected the Cal Poly professors' research to a few less-than-flattering comments in newspaper articles quoting some lobbying groups unhappy with the research findings. But the institute also receives requests from groups seeking public policy research support.

The researchers have to remind all callers that their mission is to conduct unbiased academic research. "The No. 1 imperative at an academic institution is to make sure your research is unbiased. You make sure you use the best methodology, and you try to gather the best data. Then your results are
what your results are, and where the chips fall is where the chips fall," Noel says.

Sometimes those chips settle onto a public policy or regulatory debate that’s already highly charged – emotionally as well as economically. Timber policies in particular fall into that category, Noel notes.

“We’re studying issues where the stakes are high. You’re talking about millions of dollars, in some cases, billions of dollars,” Noel says. “What we’re trying to do is to add information that’s useful and relevant to the public policy debate.”

The bulk of research funded by the institute is done by Cal Poly professors. A small number of UC Davis professors have also received CISSC funding for their projects, and the institute has funded master’s thesis research by Cal Poly students, as well as a few senior projects.

The double buck, choker race and caber toss. Sounds like games in a prehistoric Olympiad. Then there’s birling, axe throwing and chain sawing.

Definitely not for the faint of heart, these activities are just some of the traditional events that Cal Poly’s Logging Team competes in during a typical three-day conclave.

The intercollegiate team consists of 12 men and eight women who take great pleasure in the heart-pounding excitement of forestry field skills – demanding skills that require not only the physical attributes of strength, balance and technique, but also the mental acuity to read a compass, identify dozens of plants and trees by both their common and Latin names, and employ the laws of trigonometry in estimating tree height and diameter, no tools allowed.

Students compete in both technical events, like those just mentioned, and lumber jack events, including the more-physically challenging water sports, such as birling (log running) and the limber pole.

For the limber pole event, a debarked, slippery log is suspended over a pond, supported only at the base and extending about 25 to 30 feet at a 45-degree angle. Contestants start at the base, trying to get as close to the end as possible as the log moves and wiggles. “It’s like running on jelly,” says Steve Oriol, team president. “It feels like you’re dancing all over the planet.”

The conclaves also include several events on land and limb. The land-based contests include sawing, chopping, pole climbing, ax throwing, log tossing and running an obstacle course, while towing a large steel cable. Of course. All in a day’s work.

In addition to the three conclaves the students compete in annually, the team puts on several exhibitions a year. Last spring they were filmed entertaining the crew of the Discovery Channel’s “Monster Garage,” showing off their skills in axe throwing and single and double bucking.