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Santa Cruz shows its stuff for first time at State Fair

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SANTA CRUZ — Little mechanical people will pick apples from a dwarf tree and play at a miniature boardwalk when Santa Cruz makes its debut at the California State Fair in Sacramento this weekend.

For the first time, Santa Cruz County has set up a booth at the fair, so the county's Conference and Visitors Council decided it should do the booth up in style.

South county Supervisor Sherry Mehl said Thursday that there was no secret reason why Santa Cruz had never sponsored a booth in the fair's 136-year history.

"I don't think anyone ever took an interest in it before," she said. Mehl credits the Conference and Visitors Council for promoting the booth idea and raising contributions for it.

Rita Quinn, the council's executive director, hopes the booth will lure "off peak" overnight visitors from the Central Valley to the

county during fall, winter and spring — slower seasons for tourism in Santa Cruz.

"We want to extend our hand out and invite them over here," Quinn said.

"Tourism subsidizes our tax base," said Michael Sarka, chairman of the State Fair Task Force. "That makes it particularly attractive."

About 350,000 people are expected to tour the booths of the 43 counties participating in the fair from today through Sept. 4.

Margie Steen, conference sales manager with the council said the booth, designed by Gaffney Display of Pope Valley, captures the diversity of the county and may win one of the booth awards.

It has four short redwood trees, a bit of beach and boardwalk, an array of local wines, a greenhouse filled with mums and carnations, displays of all the frozen foods the county produces and crates of home-grown apples. And the little

mechanical people: an apple picker and packer, a mom and two kids.

"I didn't know the little people moved until they turned on the electricity," she said.

The council funded the \$8,300 booth with financing and in-kind donations from the county, Farm Bureau, local food processors, vineyards; UC Santa Cruz; the chambers of commerce of Watsonville, Scotts Valley and San Lorenzo Valley, the Felton Business Association, Seaciff and Dream inns; Holiday Inn, and Roaring Camp and Big Trees Railroad. The money also pays for transporting and setting up the booth at the Los Angeles County Fair in September.

Volunteers from the organizations involved will hand out event calendars and coupon books for discounts at county businesses.

"This is the first time the county has pulled together with the two major forces of agriculture and tourism. It makes a nice mix," said executive director Quinn.