

COUNTY GENERAL

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Which is No. 1 ... Tourism or farming?

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APTOS — What's the No.1 industry in Santa Cruz County?

Supervisor Walt Symons called agriculture the top business in the area at a candidate forum Tuesday.

Doug Deitch, one of his challengers in the March 26 election, quickly took issue.

"Tourism is No.1," he said, chiding the incumbent for saying differently.

Ask candidate and longtime Aptos resident Paul Elerick and he will say his "gut feeling" is that tourism is tops.

There's no doubt that both are vital to the county's economy. The experts in this battle of No. 1's have heard this dispute before.

It's a friendly but continuing debate, said Jess Brown, head of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau.

The gross value of crops in Santa Cruz County is valued at about \$246 million, and for each dollar there is another \$2.50 generated in supplies and support in raising those crops, he said.

The other side of the competition is also aware of the split.

"It's a good indication that there are two healthy industries," said Maggie Ivy, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Conference and Visitors Council.

A recent state Department of Commerce report showed that about \$422 million came into the county through tourism in a year, she said.

Symons stood by his answer the day after the forum, pointing out that there is more than just farming in Santa Cruz County, including timber harvests and a cattle industry as well.

The candidates were responding to a question asking them about their views on how to encourage industry in South County.

Symons noted the loss of some frozen food plants in Watsonville, which have relocated to Mexico and other areas.

About 7,000 people are employed in the agricultural field, according to Symons, who also says that ensuring there is affordable housing for workers is another way to preserve the industry.

A retired school administrator, the conservative Symons is seeking a second term as supervisor. The Second District stretches from Capitola to Corralitos.

The fourth candidate, Lowell Hurst, an agriculture business teacher and a Watsonville City Councilman, did not attend Tuesday's forum due to a council meeting.

On Wednesday, he said he didn't know which of the two important industries had the greater dollar value, but stressed that they are not exclusive industries.

"I think we can promote more eco-tourism with an agricultural focus," he said.

Hurst cited how a delegation of farmers from Japan will be visiting the area to tour local farms and related businesses.

"Groups of agriculturists throughout the world welcome the opportunity to come to Santa Cruz and see crops not grown anywhere else," he said. "That's tourism and that's agriculture combined."

Hurst also said that government should support essential services like water, sewer and roads that will help businesses.



Farmers say the annual \$246 million is augmented by \$2.50 per dollar in supplies and support. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file



Government reports show \$422 million came into the county through tourism in a year. Dan Coyro/Sentinel

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