

Pajaro Valley's 'Mr. Equipment' retires

Inman spent 25 years helping area farmers

By GREG BEEBE
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WATSONVILLE — John Inman, the county's outgoing UC Cooperative Extension director, will talk to you about berries and brussels sprouts, lettuce and legumes.

He'll explain why saltwater is intruding into the Pajaro Valley's wells, and how \$244 million in county agricultural products are shipped to points throughout the world.

But ask him about farm engineering and agricultural mechanics, and Inman, 53, lights up like a red flare on a country road.

If it's a gadget, gizmo or piece of equipment used in farming, Inman knows it inside and out; in fact, there's a chance he helped develop it.

The affable Inman — recently declared "Mr. Equipment" by California Farmer magazine — retired Friday as the county's UC Cooperative Extension director, a job he held for about two years.

For more than 25 years, he also served as the Extension's farm engineer in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, officiating over the menage a trois of agriculture, academics and technology.

"He's been very instrumental in helping a lot of farmers," said Jess Brown, manager of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau.

Inman has led countless tours of Pajaro Valley growing operations, guiding visiting farmers from far away as Moldavia, dignitaries from the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, and area business people attending Farmerama and Focus Ag educational seminars.

Dave Moeller, the county Agricultural



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

John Inman pauses Friday in a field along Riverside Road.

Commissioner, described Inman as an "ambassador" for the farming industry with a special talent for "taking years and years of experience and wisdom and practically applying it."

Farmers credit Inman for introducing the Pajaro Valley to important new technology for the mechanized planting of seeds and the transplanting of seedlings.

Said Dick Peixoto, an area lettuce grower, "The planters that we use today, the Swedish plow that we use, he's done a lot of work on that."

Inman has played a key role in helping area growers use heavy equipment without damaging expensive, water-saving drip

irrigation systems; and employing mechanical means to reduce the use of chemicals, said Sonya Hammond, director of Monterey County's UC Cooperative Extension program.

Inman has traveled the world, scouting technology that can be applied to the valley's array of specialty crops. Most large equipment manufacturers, said Hammond, won't make equipment for specialty farmers because it's not profitable.

"This is a hard area to find machinery for," said Hammond. "We're not going to see a whole lot of wheat harvesting here."

Inman's travels have made him somewhat of a celebrity at European farm

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equipment shows. One of his first acts in retirement will be attending a November agricultural machinery show in Bologna, Italy.

"I've had a chance to meet growers from other areas in the United States, Canada, Europe and visit farming operations in those countries. ...

"And I'm still impressed that we're on the cutting edge."

Born and raised on a cattle ranch in eastern Oregon, Inman graduated in 1965 from Oregon State University with degrees in agricultural and engineering. After college, he had three job choices:

"One was to work for Campbell's Soup Co. and another was to go to the island of Lanai (in Hawaii) to work for Dole and the third one was to work for University of California," said Inman.

"I took this one and I probably wasn't quite sure what (the job) was. But after 28 years I obviously liked it."

The biggest changes in farming since 1965, said Inman, have come in the fields of marketing and technology.

"The industry has become more marketing oriented while it's continued to make significant gains in production technology," he said. "We've made significant gains with the introduction of integrated pest management, reducing the amount of (pesticides) we're using. ...

"Now (farmers) are fully into computers

for accounting and (agricultural) management and in some cases I'm working with the third generation (of growers). ..."

Engineers are working on a new orchard sprayer that "uses sonar to detect the trees so it actually shuts the sprayer off between the tree" to reduce the amount of pesticide in the environment, and save money, said Inman.

A UC Davis professor, he said, is working on a farm cultivator that "uses a video camera to take a picture of the (crop) row and that signal goes into a computer which differentiates between the weeds and the plants and the cultivator is automatically steered to stay on the row."

In test runs, the video-cam cultivator can plow at up to 10 miles per hour; the best Pajaro Valley tractor driver tops out at about 1-2 mph, said Inman.

Due to budget cuts in the UC system, Hammond will take over as the director of Cooperative Extension in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, beginning Nov. 1.

Inman says he'll work as an engineering consultant and continue to write a column for American Vegetable Grower magazine. He'll also remain active with several community councils, including the Hartnell College Board of Trustees and the Technical Advisory Committee to the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency. He lives in Salinas with his wife Joyce, a school teacher.

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