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# **GSA Keeps its Eyes on Issues in Agriculture World**

In this, my first regular column, I'd like to begin by thanking *The Salinas Californian* for inviting me to write a monthly article in Ag Monday.

As many of you probably know, The Grower-Shipper Association of Central California (GSA) is the area's oldest regional agricultural association and represents over 300 members in Monterey, San Benito, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz Counties. I have worked for GSA for almost 30 years during which time I've seen our association's primary issues change, reemerge, and catapult us into completely unforeseen challenges. Just last week we tallied the results of our annual "Issues Survey", a summary of our member's primary concerns for the current year. This survey creates a roadmap for our board and staff so that we may better direct our focus, efforts, and resources on these challenges.

## **Top 10 GSA Issues for 2008**

### **1. Food Safety**

For more than 10 years GSA has focused its attention on food safety, but over the past five years this issue has remained at the top of our priority list as the industry has put forth tremendous attention and resources to ensure a safe food supply.

### **2. Farm Labor Availability/Immigration Reform**

Without the valuable contributions of our farmworkers we could not bring fresh produce to your supermarket shelves and favorite restaurants. The industry is committed to supporting and achieving comprehensive immigration reform that ensures a safe, fair and legal infrastructure for allowing non-citizens to work in our fields and processing plants and a path to legalization for those who are already here.

### **3. Labor and Employment Law Issues**

Of utmost importance to our members is that they and their employees be educated on, and comply with, constantly changing laws and policies by federal, state, county and city governments so that they can provide a healthy, safe and productive work environment. GSA conducts over 70 workshops each year to assist our members in this regard.

### **4. Water Supply/Water Quality**

A safe and clean water supply is essential for the production of fresh produce. GSA works with local, state and federal agencies and coalitions to maintain and improve water storage and distribution while being sensitive to environmental and conservation program needs.

### **5. Ag Theft and Vandalism**

Over the past five years agricultural theft of tractors, irrigation pipe and many more industry tools have risen substantially. GSA, in collaboration with the Monterey County Sheriff's office founded the Central Coast Ag Crime Task Force to help combat this issue.

### **6. Wage and Hour Issues**

GSA is committed to educating our members about their wage and hour law requirements and provides workshops for employers and managers to ensure their compliance with these laws.

#### 7. Energy Costs

A tremendous amount of fuel and electricity goes into producing, cooling and distributing the hundreds of millions of pounds of produce we grow each year. GSA works diligently to inform our members of energy efficient options and conservation solutions.

#### 8. Health Insurance Costs/Workers Compensation

Although workers' compensation costs have begun to decrease in recent years thanks to statewide legislation both health insurance and workers' compensation insurance continue to be tremendously expensive in California. GSA works to maintain discussions with local, state and federal government to address this pressing problem.

#### 9. Farm Labor Housing

Farm labor housing is a requirement of the national H-2A program and therefore a cost that many of our members are incurring as they struggle to maintain their workforce. GSA has worked with County Supervisor Simon Salinas, Assembly Member Anna Caballero, Congressman Sam Farr and Senator Dianne Feinstein and will continue its ongoing collaboration with these and other representatives to address this critical need.

#### 10. Air Quality Regulation and Legislation

Although our tri-county area has some of the best air quality in the state we must still keep focused on VOC regulations and statewide legislation pertaining to air quality.

Coming in just under the top 10 of the GSA hit parade was the General Plan Update/Land Use. This is an extremely important issue as well and something we devote substantial time and resources to.

The top three issues in this survey haven't changed in the last three years, and the top two were named on every member's response form. This list essentially sets our work agenda for the year.

With a focus on the top needs and concerns of our members GSA launched a new website this April, <http://www.growershipper.com>. This site will keep our members and you, our neighbors, apprised of our activities and progress. I encourage you to visit it today to learn more about Central Coast Agriculture.

*Jim Bogart is the President and General Counsel of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California.*