

# Ag program faces perils

The "California Grown" advertising campaign to persuade Californians to buy produce from their home state is a two-edged sword.

State agriculture officials unveiled the campaign at the California State Fair in Sacramento.

Gov. Gray Davis has embraced the campaign's concept, saying, "You can't get any better food than the food raised in California."

At the same time, he added, "I know it sounds like boosterism ... (but) No one else in the world has the high standards we have."

Selling more California products is an admirable goal. However, boosterism, indeed, must be held in check. Lee Frankel, president of the Fresh Produce Assn. of the Americas, told the *Los Angeles Times*: "There's nothing wrong with people promoting their products, but if they try to disparage the competition, they're going to have a problem."

The \$32 million program — \$20 million in federal funds and the rest from the state and industry — will feature television spots and supermarket signs featuring the "California Grown" license plate logo.

Frankel believes growers would be better served if the state spent some of the \$32 million in developing tastier varieties of fruit that don't deteriorate in the shipping process.

Some growers and others also are skeptical about the program. An apple grower from Fresno, Bill Gentle, told the *Times*: "If Washington Fuji apples are priced at 69 cents a pound and California apples at 79 cents a pound (a television campaign) is not going to sell one extra pound."

Consumers, he added, care about quali-

ty and price rather than where their produce comes from.

Ralph Watts, chief executive of the Buy California program, promises the campaign won't be critical of other growing areas. Rather, he said, it will feature Californians talking about why they support local agriculture. "We're just telling people when they have a choice to buy California," he said.

Dan Sumner, head of the Agricultural Issues Center at UC Davis, said officials running the program must be careful. "The last thing we want is to encourage the Japanese to have a 'Buy Japanese' program any more than they do already."

Ag officials counter that the ads are needed to put more cash in growers' pockets. Net income on California's farms declined 32 percent in 2001 to \$3.8 billion from \$5.6 billion as prices for many of the state's 350 commodities dropped and production costs increased.

However, the lack of fast-track trading authority for the president and his negotiators have limited the opportunities for California growers and farmers to export more of their products.

As Rep. Bill Thomas, R-Bakersfield, observed in a speech last week, "We have not been in the international (trading) arena for some time."

But that should change quickly. Thomas was one of the leaders in passing this summer the trade authority law. This will make it easier for the Bush administration to get trade treaties negotiated.

That probably will give California agriculturists a better chance to sell more products and improve their income than the Buy California campaign.

**Promotional ad campaign must be careful not to goad other growing areas to engage in a trade war.**