

Mountain Democrat

PLACERVILLE, CALIFORNIA



Spencer Tregilgas is the latest dairyman at the old Veerkamp Ranch/Wakamatsu Farm. He has spoken with Phil Veerkamp, who ran the dairy for 18 years. Photos by Michael Raffety

Opinion

Belltower: Ag tour features Wakamatsu and water

By Michael Raffety

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Water and its importance to agriculture was the theme of the 54th Agricultural Tour sponsored by the El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce.

Despite the theme, the most interesting note of the tour came at the first stop at the Wakamatsu Farm. A young couple – Spencer and Melissa Tregilgas have actually revived the original dairy operation last operated by Malcolm and Phil Veerkamp until about 1991 after 50 years of dairy operation that began in 1941. The next year Malcolm died.

The 1991 closure of the dairy came four years after a 1987 Mountain Democrat feature on the dairymen saved the 272-acre property from having part of its pasture condemned by the school district for a new elementary school. The school instead was built on the corner of Luneman and Lotus roads on a walnut orchard owned by Ed Vance, who took the money and moved to Jacksonville, Ore., east of Ashland.

The Tregilgases are milking six cows and plan to bring it up to 16, which is how many the Veerkamps milked. They are irrigating 11 acres and also raising beef, pork and lamb for sale.

Melissa Tregilgas listens as Kevin Howell talks about his 10 acres of vegetables.

Across the street where Veerkamp rented out pasture for someone else's cattle after the dairy closed, is now 10 acres of mixed vegetables operated by Kevin Nowell, who supplies restaurants and will be open for sales to the public Friday through Sunday.



The American River Conservancy reached a deal in 2007 with the Helen L. Veerkamp Trust held by Phil, Gary and Evelyn Veerkamp. The deal closed in 2010 for \$3.88 million, the appraised value.

Phil and Marian Veerkamp lived in the house where the Tregilgases and their two daughters now live. It is shaded by three mulberry trees, all that remain of the 50,000 mulberry trees the 20 Japanese brought from Aizu-Wakamatsu and planted in 1869 to grow silk worms. Another tree left over from the Wakamatsu era is a huge keaki tree that shades a corner of the house that Charles Graner built in 1856.

The Graner house was picked up in a tax sale in 1874 by Francis Veerkamp.

The Japanese colony largely disappeared after 1871 when placer miners moved in and disturbed the silk and tea colony's water source.

The Veerkamp property was eventually served by the Coloma Ditch system that had begun in 1849-50. The farmer-owned Coloma Ditch was later replaced by piped water from the El Dorado Irrigation District.

Two-thirds of EID was attributable to agriculture, according to an Ag Tour presentation by retired EID general counsel Tom Cumpston. Now that figure is 20 percent Cumpston said.

However, May 3 figures provided by EID Customer Service Manager Jennifer Downey show 685 farm customers versus 951 multi-family and 32,330 single-family customers. Dividing 685 by 33,281 equals 2 percent. The big difference has been a reduction of small farms by factor 10 as the general manager added a requirement of having half an acre under cultivation.

EID was formed in 1925 by farmers and Placerville residents after an extensive campaign by the Mountain Democrat.

As part of a cost of service study done in 2008 and adopted by the board in 2010, Principle 9 states, "*Establish agricultural irrigation rates that recognize agriculture's role in the District's formation and development, the quality of water required to serve these customers, and the level of service provided.*"

The community advisory committee unanimously adopted Principle 9. The public members of the panel included Kim Beal, Tom Heflin, Doug Liesz, the late Albert Hazbun and Greg Prada. Prada won election to the board in 2013 and has since said agriculture should pay the same rates as residential customers. Ag customers pay residential rates on the first two tiers of water usage and agricultural rates on the third tier.

El Dorado Hills resident Darwin Throne is suing the district, claiming ag rates violate Proposition 218, which prohibits rate structures that exceed the cost of service. Proposition 218 does not apply to non-rate revenue, according to a 2015 memo from then General Counsel Cumpston that a unanimous vote earlier this year authorized its release to the public. In analyzing the San Juan Capistrano Case Cumpston noted that in each rate class EID's rates are less than the cost of service and rate classes are not required to be proportional. EID's rate are subsidized by property tax revenue, which keeps rates lower than the actual cost of service.

A new cost of service study is planned for 2019.

The election-filing period for Prada's Division 2 seat began July 16.