

2019

## **JIM KUHN LEADERSHIP AWARD**

*California Alfalfa & Forage Association,  
Representing the Forage Growers of California*

# **Philip Bowles**

Merced County Farmer and Alfalfa Industry Leader

It is with great pride that the California Alfalfa & Forage Association has selected Philip Bowles, a prominent Merced County Farmer, for the Jim Kuhn Leadership Award in 2019.

Philip Bowles richly deserves this award. The Jim Kuhn Leadership Award is presented annually to a person or organization for their lasting contributions to the California alfalfa industry. The award was established in 2005 when Kuhn, a forage innovator, was killed in a vehicle accident near his ranch in El Centro, CA. Nominees are judged on their knowledge of alfalfa, record of leadership and the extent and depth of their contributions to the California alfalfa industry and to rural communities.

Philip has been a life-long advocate of alfalfa and the values that Jim Kuhn inspired; a passion for farming and ranching, the need for leadership. In addition, over the past decades, Philip has managed a large farming business with all of its challenges. Bowles Farming in Los Banos, CA is one of the venerable California farming operations which traces its roots to the expanding agriculture of the 1850s. The 'Miller & Lux' agricultural empire was one of the pioneering ranches in the West, once the largest producer of cattle in California, and was an early innovator in production of alfalfa under irrigation. Henry Miller (see the book, *The Cattle King*) was Philip's great, great grandfather and Bowles Farming is the current incarnation of this historical farming enterprise, which remains a 6-generation family farm managed by his nephew, Cannon Michael.

Philip himself came to farming in a rather circuitous route. Growing up mostly in coastal San Francisco, he nevertheless enjoyed his family links to the farm in the Central Valley. He received a degree in drama from Yale University in 1973 and worked for a time in the film industry in New York where he met his wife of 46 years, Jamie. He came to work at Bowles in 1980 where his uncle George Bowles and father Henry Miller Bowles were managing the farm. "It was an experiment on my part and on the part of my uncle and my father" Philip adds. "I wanted to come back because I missed California and was getting a little burned out in New York working in the film industry". He also wanted an environment to raise a family. "The land talks to you" he adds. Philip became president of the company in 1990 until his retirement in 2013. He has two grown children who have become scientists.

Philip's passion for farming and all-things-alfalfa has been palpable. Philip was a co-founder of CAFA and has served on its board for many years as member and president. In 1997, Philip Bowles (along with others) visited with Marc Reisner (a long-term friend of Philip's with whom he often disagreed) in Sausalito, CA, to discuss environmental issues associated with



alfalfa. Mr. Reisner's 1993 book 'Cadillac Desert' was quite critical of alfalfa as one of the 'CRAP Crops' (cotton, rice, alfalfa, pasture) which wastes water—the grower's counter argument was that alfalfa contributes mightily to the environmental health and wildlife habitat of California, as well as the economy. This was the impetus for the formation of CAFA, since at that time there was no association representing the state's 1.5 million acres of alfalfa & grass production fields nor the thousands of farmers who grew these crops.

Nationally, Philip has also been a leader – a grower representative board member to the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance (NAFA). He has frequently walked the halls of congress to promote the efforts of alfalfa growers particularly to support research. Alfalfa, as the nation's #3 economic crop, has historically been under-funded for research dollars. Philip's efforts paid off in 2015 through 2019-as USDA developed an alfalfa-specific competitive grants program (now \$4 million/year), as well as the funding of two alfalfa-specific positions (currently being filled) in California. Without his efforts (as well as others) these would not have happened.

Philip is also an intellectual leader for the industry. Philip has given several presentations at the Western and California Alfalfa Symposia including a talk on marketing alfalfa (2009) where he points out that his family has been selling hay for over 100 years. "Selling hay is no different than selling shoes or sailboats. Explain, listen, be fair, and remember the customer is always right". He points out that the 'unit cost of production' (not the price) is the key economic factor. "Put the majority of your effort into the things that you can control" he writes, pointing out that farmers cannot control dairy price or other factors, but can control costs and quality. "Stop whining about prices. Focus on quality. Know and deliver value to your customers" he advises.

During the introduction of Roundup-Ready® alfalfa, Philip was a key speaker at the Alfalfa Symposium to articulate the need for coexistence between neighbors (What are the Key Elements to Implement Coexistence between GE and Non-GE alfalfa? – Philip Bowles, 2011 – see <http://alfalfa.ucdavis.edu> for symposia proceedings). In this article, he promotes the importance of cooperation between neighbors, to assure that growers not interfere with practices of neighbors who don't want GE crops. However, never one to mince words, he writes "No one has gotten ill from DNA poisoning. Promulgating medieval nostrums...is constitutionally protected religious expression, but it is not science. The hysteria over the perceived dangers from GMO crops is nearly as unsupportable".

Philip has been a big supporter of the University of California research. He has hosted research on his farm, and he's always open to new ideas and has entertained many different projects related to forage production that have benefited the industry, including early introduction of subsurface drip irrigation in alfalfa. He has supported research both intellectually and with numerous donations of time and money. In the mid-2010s, CAFA formed the California Alfalfa & Forage Research Foundation, to which Philip generously contributed, which supports alfalfa and forage research.

It is with great affection that the CAFA board presents Philip with this award. He is highly deserving of this prestigious Jim Kuhn Leadership Award for supporting the alfalfa and forage industry, being a leader promoting alfalfa, as well as being an astute businessman.

For a complete listing of the Jim Kuhn Award recipients, see: <http://www.calhay.org/kuhn.html>

--Daniel H. Putnam, UC Davis