

## **Weeds in Paradise; A Journalist's Perspective**

By Harry Cline  
Editor, Western Farm Press

I am definitely on the wrong side of the microphone.

My proper place is on the front row; note pad in hand and tape recorder close by, making the person behind this microphone feel uncomfortable with each scribble on the note pad. I now know how many of you feel up here with me down there.

It is an honor to be here at the 59th annual California Weed Science Society conference. I am not sure how many of these I have covered. However, there is one I missed, and I want to take this opportunity to offer the society an apology for not attending your annual meeting a few years back in San Jose. It was there that the California Weed Science Society honored me with its Award of Excellence. I was truly honored. And to all who had a hand in that nomination, thank you very much.

I am also embarrassed—to this day—for not being there to accept that gracious honor. There was one of those mix-ups in communications, and I was not aware in advance of the award presentation. Had I been aware, I would have been there to humbly accept it before the society. Again, I apologize for the mixup.

When Carl Bell asked me to be part of this afternoon's program to offer a journalist's perspective on Weeds in Paradise, it gave me an opportunity to reflect back on the three decades of reporting on California agriculture.

It has been three decades of writing about weeder geese in cotton and herbicide-resistant transgenic crops; articles on the vineyard French plow and implements called Optimizers and Eliminators that do in one pass what once took maybe six trips across a field and writing about availability of hoe crews and electronic-eye cultivators capable of following a row of seedling lettuce without touching the smallest leaf.

I recall the first article I did on the electronic-eye cultivator. It reminds me of how far technology has come in just a short 30 years. The row-following cultivator did a great job, but the Salinas Valley lettuce grower who was using it complained that he had it set to come too close to the plants because it was disturbing the ground too much around the seedlings. This is a Millennium away from weeder geese cotton.

It has been a remarkable 3-decades of vegetation management stories I have been privileged to cover as an ag journalist. It is detailed well in a Power Point Ron Vargas put together a few years ago that is still available on the UC Cooperative Extension Cotton production website.

The presentation is entitled, [Cotton Production and Weed Control Revisited](#). It's more than the story of cotton weed control. It is a history of vegetation management in California agriculture and well worth a website visit.

When Western Farm Press began publishing in the late 1970s, the publisher and owner then was insistent that the men and women in the land grant university system and its Cooperative Extension services were the first stops to gather unbiased, third-party information for publication. It was a tenant I have never forgotten. I saw early-on what that trust and integrity was all about going on a farm call with the legendary Fresno County farm advisor Bill Fischer. Before he retired, Bill would call, wanting to show me something he had discovered in one of his herbicide trials. On the way out to the trial he said he had to make a farm call. A grower wanted him to look at some stunted sugar beets.

Some of you know where I'm going.

We stopped at the beet field. Areas of the field were yellow and stunted, including plants all around the field's edges. A couple of swaths through the field were also noticeably shorter and yellow.

It took Bill what seemed like only moments to assess the problem. And he was not happy about the farmer wasting his time trying to get Bill to blame the problem on a chemical so the farmer could collect damages.

I was clueless. Bill pulled up a beet. It looked like a corkscrew.

"Too much Treflan!" Bill proclaimed, explaining to the novice ag journalist that a doubled rate of Treflan was responsible for the beet field problems. I cannot recall if the problem was the result of over application of the herbicide in the cotton crop grown the year before or an over application of the herbicide on the beet field. Either way, the damage was caused by a well-meaning tractor driver who had made some double passes around the field edge and through the center where he thought he had not gone with the herbicide rig. It was a double application of herbicide that damaged parts of the beet crop.

There was no product liability here, proclaimed Bill as we jumped back in the pickup and headed for his test plot. The farmer may have thought Bill would back up his damage claim. He could not have been more mistaken.

That was at least 25 years ago, and it remains a vivid reminder of just one example the integrity of the UC agricultural system and its vital role as an unbiased, respected third party.

Weed control specialists and farm advisors have kept the weeds out of paradise as evidenced by the amazingly clean fields, orchards and vineyards in California. They are clean because of the vegetation management systems developed by you all.

It is a daunting task as Leonard Gianessi detailed recently at the Southern Crop Production Association annual meeting in Florida. Leonard is director of the Crop Protection Institute, a research unit of CropLife America Foundation.

There are more than 400 million weed species in the U.S. with the potential to slash yields if not controlled.

Today as much as 95 percent of all U.S. cropland—about 220 million acres—is treated with herbicides each year with an estimated 550 trillion weeds killed.

Use rates, application technology and the most efficient way to use these herbicides and other vegetation management technology was developed by you.

Unfortunately, the public does not realize that. They do not realize what you do to protect the food and fiber production of this state and this nation.

And no one is going to tell them unless you do. The information pipeline that once hailed agriculture as the noblest profession in America has been choked by weeds of ignorance and deception.

These are the true Weeds in Paradise.

Newspapers and television talking heads are not going to tell the public what you do and the value of it.

We all realize this is not a new problem. It began at least a generation back when I began my career it was as a newspaper reporter. I was not raised on a farm, but I had uncles and aunts who farmed. And there were many others in the newsrooms where I worked who had similar backgrounds. We all had at least an appreciation of agriculture if not the memory of spending summers working on the farm.

Today, there are few, if any, in the newsrooms of television stations and newspapers who have that understanding. And, unfortunately, most of them do not care to understand it.

One reason is facts and objectivity have fallen out of the journalist's code of ethics. I spent the earlier part of my career in newspapers, but left when facts, unbiased reporting and integrity no longer were the foundations of news gathering.

I started my journalism career more than 40 years ago as a copy boy on a major Texas newspaper. Right out of high school and a freshman in college, I was living my dream of working for my hometown, daily newspaper. Great memories are still with me from those years. One memory still vividly lingers. It is of a small-statured, red-haired city editor. Johnny King was his name.

He had a temper and a very, very short fuse. Newsrooms in those days were big open rooms filled with desks. No wall. No cubicles. Johnny would often stand up after reading a story he did not deem worthy of printing and would bellow: "Who in the hell wrote this?" and then call out slug line or title of the article. The silence in that bustling newsroom was deafening after he yelled. Everyone waited for the reporter who wrote the story to start walking toward the city desk to retrieve his story for rewriting. It was no doubt covered with red pencil marks.

When I read some of the agricultural stories in the local newspapers, I want to stand up and yell just like that city editor did a few years ago. I have suggested such a management practice to the publisher of the Fresno Bee after reading some of the stuff that gets in print. He did not like my suggestion. I guess my suggestion was politically incorrect.

One of my most recent tirades to the Bee publisher and editor came after reading an article that stated that organic farming was "the only regulated agriculture in California." I could not believe that made it into print. I wrote the Bee to tell them that the California Department of Food and Agriculture, CalEPA and DPR, Department of Water Resources, all county agriculture commissioners and countless other agencies and people would glad to learn they do not regulate California agriculture. There was no clarification or retraction in the Fresno Fish Wrap.

Unfortunately, there is no dinitroaniline or glyphosate to weed out ignorance and bad journalism. However, as you have heard others say, as scientists you need to cultivate the news

media to get your story and the story of California agriculture told. Not all will listen. However, some will.

Be willing to send your newsletters and bulletins to the local paper. If you read something in the paper that you think was well-done, call or e-mail the reporter an attaboy. Offer yourself as a resource for articles. Even suggest an article.

And there is no need to apologize for what you do.

Economist and futurist Jay Lehr speaking at the recent CAPCA conference said 100 years ago the public perception of California agriculture was that it was everything great about the state and nation. After World War II, the advent of farm chemicals allowed farmers to improve food quality, increase yields, and eliminate pests that infect food.

All of a sudden a target was painted on our backs by environmental advocacy groups like the Environmental Working Group. Lehr said. The farmer became the bad guy with a black hat on a black horse, he said. The problem in the pesticide industry is not that pesticides are bad, which they aren't. The problem is that people don't know what the farmer, weed scientist, entomologist and pest control adviser do and how these products are used.

“You guys are doing incredible work, but you are slinking around because the media says you are using bad stuff. I challenge you to stand taller, be proud of what you do and explain the benefits to society,” Lehr admonished PCAs. I suggest the same thing to you as weed scientists.

Lehr provided the PCAs with a toolbox of facts to share with consumers. He said chemical use has tripled farm yields on almost every acre in America over the last 40 years. Without herbicides, pesticides, fungicides and other products, food costs would double. He referred to fertilizers as plant nutrients and farm chemicals as medicines. Pesticides are to a plant what antibiotics are to humans. Herbicides kill the negatives that interfere with plant health.

Lehr's message is one we seldom hear today. We are too busy apologizing or defending ourselves against the likes of groups like the Environmental Working Group, Organic Consumers Association and groups with warm and fuzzy-sounding names with war chests from foundations to hire lawyers whose goals are largely not to protect the environment, but to raise more money to self-perpetuate themselves.

Many of these have the keys to the front door of the newspapers and television stations because they sound like they know what they are talking about. You know that by reading what they often palm off on the mass media. Most reporters today are not interested in finding out if what they have been told is true. What is even worse, they do not seek out those who would challenge incorrect information or offer another perspective.

I had a few dealings with this crowd during the round of county anti-biotech initiatives a year or so ago.

I don't want to categorize all of the people involved in the anti-biotech movement as kooks. Some are well-meaning and sincere in their conviction, even if they are based on false and misleading information. However, most, including the leaders are basically socialists who want our democratic society to dissolve. They do not care about the environment. Their calling is to destroy democracy and capitalism. Harsh? Perhaps, but I sincerely believe that. Many of those involved in the anti-biotech movement in California are involved in many other anti-business, anti-societal protests.

One of those I communicated with during the anti-biotech campaigns was a very bright young man who lived in the Sierra foothills. He was articulate and an excellent writer. We communicated over several months until he told me he would be away for several weeks visiting family in the Northeast. When he returned, I asked if he enjoyed his visit and it was then he admitted he did not visit family. He finally admitted he had been in Chicago directing protests at the Republican National Convention.

The Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC) in Sonoma County was the headquarters of the anti-biotech crowd during the round of county initiatives. The man who heads the center is Dave Hensen.

To his credit, he called me and asked that we visit concerning what I had been writing about the anti-biotech movement.

He cited obscure scientific papers as we talked about the issue. He was very articulate and sounded convincing and well-educated. He also sounded very condescending as if I were some one he could snow with what I call pseudo-scientific babbling.

When he walks into a newsroom, reporters love him. If he calls a news conference, the radio station and television microphones are lined up in front of him. He is very good at grabbing headlines with his pseudo science.

After we had visited, I asked him about his educational background. He hesitated and responded "I have taken classes on the subject."

Let me read his bio from the ecology center's website:

Dave Henson is a [Sowing Circle Community](#) member and Director of OAEC. He also directs our Ecological Agriculture and Sustainable Food Systems Program and co-directs our [Intentional Communities Program](#). With a background in environmental studies, sociology and law, Dave has worked for 27 years with many environmental organizations, including the Environmental Project on Central America, the Highlander Center, the National Toxics Campaign, and Greenpeace. He has lectured and led activist workshops around the US and in over 20 countries. Dave currently serves on the steering committees of the Wild Farm Alliance, the Genetic Engineering Action Network, Californians for GE-Free Agriculture, and the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy.

As far as I can ascertain, Henson does not even have a bachelor's degree yet he was the driving force in the so-called science-based anti-biotech campaign in California. Fortunately, farmers in Butte, San Luis Obispo, Sonoma and Humboldt counties banned together to turn back this anti-

biotech initiative. About a dozen other county boards of supervisors also rejected any attempts to initiate anti-biotech bans their counties.

Not all of agriculture's detractors are uneducated. Let me give you an example. In the midst of my "bullying" of the anti-biotech crowd, I was asked to moderate a discussion on biotechnology in Phoenix.

The head of the Maricopa Farm Bureau put the panel together and she had a very difficult time getting someone from Sierra Club or other anti-biotech groups to send a representative to join with representatives of biotech companies, the University of Arizona and private consultants. Finally the Sierra Club agreed to send a "PhD environmentalist" from Texas to participate.

To put it bluntly, he was an embarrassment. He opened his presentation by reading antidotal comments about calves eating biotech corn and getting sick. It was from a non-scientific booklet put out by the anti-biotech crowd. And he went downhill there. The more he talked, the more it became apparent he knew little about biotechnology. However, he railed on and on about how the evils of biotechnology. He even accused the panel members of endangering society with their work and/or support of biotechnology. That drew an immediate response from one panel member who objected to be accused of putting his family in danger by conducting biotech research. Jeannette Fish from the Maricopa County Farm Bureau said as she took the doctor to the airport for his flight back to Texas he asked her if she thought he had been convincing in his anti-biotechnology presentation. She did not have the heart to tell him he only embarrassed himself. I felt sorry for the man. I later checked out the doctor on the internet. He was a PhD who had taught classes at the University of Texas, although I do not believe he had a faculty position there. His professional career with a state environmental agency was in the field of the environmental effects of burning tires to dispose of them. From what I could ascertain, he had absolutely no background in biotechnology.

I relate these incidents to you to hopefully help you understand who is opposing much of the work you do. These people do not have the credentials to challenge what you do, yet they have the ear of the media.

As scientists, you are trained to discuss your profession from scientific perspectives.

Unfortunately, many of the people who oppose modern day agricultural technology cannot or will not play fairly in a scientific debate.

When biotech cotton was nearing introduction, former UC extension cotton specialist Tom Kerby was perplexed by rising opposition to this technology.

"It's only proteins," Tom would proclaim. He was puzzled by the opposition as he explained scientifically biotechnology to me.

After listening to Tom's impassioned argument, my comment was that the debate about biotechnology or any other new agricultural technology will not be won arguing science with radicals. You are going to have to be a junkyard dog, I told Tom.

Tom said he couldn't be a junkyard dog. And because a lot of scientists tried to debate the issue with these radicals citing science, we have lost the battle. The biotech war will eventually be won, but I am convinced one of the reasons biotechnology has lagged behind is that agriculture

did not get down and dirty early on with the radicals who now lead such organizations as Greenpeace.

Unfortunately, these two-legged weeds are all over paradise. And the only way to get rid of them is with the hoe, not herbicides.

One thing I did learn from my “bullying” the anti-biotech crowd was the same thing a lot of farmers in Butte, San Luis Obispo and Sonoma county learned; if you go toe-to-toe with radicals, they turn tail and run. You can defeat them on their own turf.

It is not comfortable, but necessary. One of the tactics the farmers successfully used in Butte County was to openly challenge the anti-biotech crowd in their own so-called public forums. These radicals do not handle public challenge well.

If we are to continue to provide food and fiber for the world, we must get down and dirty with those who have little or no concern about what you and I consider vital to California and America’s future.

Thank you for your attention and thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts.