

Cattlemen's and Cattlewomen's associations, or encourage them to broaden the scope of projects they're interested in undertaking. For example, Reed has one student help him work at the school greenhouse each year.

Private businesses also are providing resources for urban students to take an interest in agriculture. Take, for instance, M&T Ranch in southwest Chico, which spans more than 8,000 acres and produces almonds, prunes and walnuts. It has provided high-schoolers with barn space and paid summer internships for decades.

Les Heringer, who has managed the ranch

since the mid-'80s, says the barn holds up to a dozen animals each year: Typically the space goes to hogs, but they've also taken in goats and sheep. These spots are specifically reserved for students who otherwise would have nowhere to house and raise livestock for the Silver Dollar Fair.

"Most of the students who are going into agriculture now were not raised on farms," Heringer said. "We're hoping the help we're giving them will help get them involved in agriculture in the future."

Agriculture is Butte County's largest economic driver. Statewide, more than a third

of the country's vegetables and two-thirds of the country's fruits and nuts are grown in California, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

"For all the students, it helps them understand what it takes to farm, what it takes to feed not only people in this country but [also] worldwide," Heringer said. "California ships to markets all over the world."

Heringer says agriculture isn't something people have to be born into to be successful in the industry. He recruited a Chico High welding student several years ago who ended up working at M&T Ranch the summer after he

graduated. He stayed on and now plays a key role, managing the herbicide and weed spray programs and supervising four employees.

"I think it's critically important for the agricultural community to reach out to the educational program[s] to get students involved ... because this is where it happens, out here. And what we're trying to do is give students a real world experience."

—ASHIAH SCHARAGA
ashiahs@newsreview.com

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