

Land Investment Monthly - June 2019

Published on Jun 4, 2019 by Steve Bruere



Apple-picking robots gear up for U.S. debut in Washington state

Next fall, as you browse the produce section at your local grocery store, pay close attention to the apples. You might be witnessing American history.

For the first time, some of the apples sold in the U.S. will be picked by a robot rather than human hands. That's thanks to agricultural automation startup Abundant Robotics, the maker of apple harvesting machines that will partake in Washington state's next harvest.

"This will be the first season that we're actually ready to harvest commercially," said Abundant CEO Dan Steere. "It's incredibly exciting."

Abundant's picker has more in common with a really smart Hoover vacuum than a human hand. The robot moves down rows of orchards and uses artificial intelligence with a dash of LIDAR to search for ripe apples. Once spotted, a robotic arm with a vacuum gently sucks the apples from the tree into a bin. [Read More](#)

Trump's second ag bailout will provide \$16 billion for farmers slammed by trade wars

The federal government will send another round of aid — \$16 billion — to help farmers reeling financially by President Donald Trump's ongoing trade war with China.

The trade assistance package would send \$14.5 billion in direct payments to farmers, U.S. Department of Agriculture leaders said Thursday.

The president knows "that because of the agricultural trade surplus, our farmers, producers and ranchers will bear the brunt of these trade disputes disproportionately," said Sonny Perdue, the U.S. agriculture secretary.

"I cannot recall a president that's been more concerned about farmer and agricultural well-being and long-term profitability than President Trump," Perdue said.

It's an important announcement for Iowa, which is estimated to lose \$2 billion annually from ongoing trade disputes with China, Mexico, Canada, Europe and other countries.

Iowa is the nation's largest pork, corn and egg producer, and second-largest soybean grower. [Read More](#)

They Grow the Nation's Food, but They Can't Drink the Water

EAST OROSI, Calif. — Water is a currency in California, and the low-income farmworkers who pick the Central Valley's crops know it better than anyone. They labor in the region's endless orchards, made possible by sophisticated irrigation systems, but at home their faucets spew toxic water tainted by arsenic and fertilizer chemicals.

"Clean water flows toward power and money," said Susana De Anda, a longtime water-rights organizer in the region. She is the daughter of lechugeros who worked in lettuce fields and helped make California one of the agricultural capitals of the world. "Homes, schools and clinics are supposed to be the safest places to go. But not in our world."

As she spoke, Ms. De Anda drove through several towns where tainted water is a fact of life, here in the state's agricultural center. In the foreground, along State Route 201, were miles of lush orange groves and dairy farms. Spotted out the passenger window of her silver Toyota was Stone Corral Elementary in the town of Seville, where century-old pipes contaminate the tap water with soil and bacteria. The school depends on grant money to pay for bottled water for students.

Today, more than 300 public water systems in California serve unsafe drinking water, according to public compliance data compiled by the California State Water Resources Control Board. It is a slow-motion public health crisis that leaves more than one million Californians exposed to unsafe water each year, according to public health officials. [Read More](#)

Agriculture clash: how small farm owners are fighting for their livelihood

According to professional economist Natalie Gochnour, Utah County is driving Utah's economy. A lot of it has to do with job growth and in-migration, which can be chalked up to Utah County's thriving tech industry.

However, Utah County's tech industry isn't the only contributor the county offers. In its most recent Economic Report to the Governor, the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute found that Utah County also had the largest total of agriculture receipts in the state. The report, which used numbers from 2017, found that Utah County was the top county for agricultural sales, totaling at \$189 million. It also had the largest number of farms statewide, at 2,462.

The reason Utah County agriculture leads the state, according to Utah County Commissioner Nathan Ivie, is because of the county's "microclimate."

"We have incredibly rich soil quality," Ivie said. "Our bench areas have the right mixture of humidity, content, temperature, warmth ... that doesn't exist anywhere else in the state."

Despite their contributions to the economy, and the unique Utah County climate that lends itself so well to farming — many small farm owners face challenges to make enough money to hold onto their farmland and feed their own families.

One of the biggest challenges facing farms and farmers in Utah County right now is the need and desire to build more homes for the growing population. A recent example of this urban vs. rural struggle is the Dixon Mink Farm, which after being encroached upon by homes for the past 33 years in Lehi, finally decided to sell their farm. Nadine Dixon specifically referenced the amount of negative feedback as a main motivator for the move. [Read More](#)

Wet weather adds to adversity for Iowa farmers

DES MOINES – For Iowa farmers, the planting season pain is real with no relief in sight.

It has been a wet, cool May so far in Iowa, and that has had a detrimental impact as farmers try to get their corn and soybeans in the ground.

Iowa corn growers had 70 percent of their expected crop planted as of May 19, the most recent data available from the federal agriculture department show. But that is more than a week behind the five-year average and the lowest percentage of the crop planted by that point in 24 years, the data show.

Planting of the state's soybean crop also is more than a week behind the five-year average.

Persistent rain and cool temperatures have left much of Iowa's field unsuitable for planting. And the weather issues come at an already difficult time for Iowa Farmers, who face market pressures from international trade disputes and weakened enforcement of the ethanol mandate.

Rick Juchems, who grows corn and soybeans on his farm near Plainfield in Bremer County, said he has about two-thirds of his corn planted. He said in a normal year he already would be done planting corn.

"It's piling up. There's not a whole lot we can do about it. There are a few things we can't control: the markets and the weather," Juchems said. "It just adds to the weight of doing business, I guess, as a farmer."

From April 24 to May 23, roughly two-thirds of Iowa counties have experienced average temperatures 4 to 6 degrees lower than normal, and even more of the state has experienced precipitation up to 3 inches more than normal, according to climate data from the state agriculture department.

It's even wetter in southeast Iowa, where roughly a dozen counties have experienced precipitation between 3 and 6 inches above normal, according to state data. [Read more](#)

'American Soil' Is Increasingly Foreign Owned

American soil.

Those are two words that are commonly used to stir up patriotic feelings. They are also words that can't be taken for granted, because today nearly 30 million acres of U.S. farmland are held by foreign investors. That number has doubled in the past two decades, which is raising alarm bells in farming communities.

When the stock market tanked during the last recession, foreign investors began buying up big swaths of U.S. farmland. And because there are no federal restrictions on the amount of land that can be foreign-owned, it's been left up to individual states to decide on any limitations.

It's likely that even more American land will end up in foreign hands, especially in states with no restrictions on ownership. With the median age of U.S. farmers at 55, many face retirement with no prospect of family members willing to take over. The National Young Farmers Coalition anticipates that two-thirds of the nation's farmland will change hands in the next few decades.

"Texas is kind of a free-for-all, so they don't have a limit on how much land can be owned," says Ohio Farm Bureau's Ty Higgins, "You look at Iowa and they restrict it — no land in Iowa is owned by a foreign entity."

[Read More](#)