



# ***From the Director***

Mary-Ann Warmerdam, Director  
Department of Pesticide Regulation

March 4, 2010

*(A version of this article originally ran in the California Association of Pest Control Advisers' magazine, Adviser).*

## **Putting a Human Face on DPR's Bureaucracy**

Bragging about DPR staff is one of my greatest pleasures as director. In that vein, I appreciate the opportunity to introduce you to Tom Babb, supervisor of our Enforcement Branch's Northern Regional Office based in West Sacramento.

Tom joined DPR in 2000 after working as the chief agronomist at Spreckels Sugar for 15 years. I think you'll agree with me that Tom's background in farming, science and industry provides him with a balanced perspective well suited for his new position. He understands agricultural issues.

Tom came to work for DPR because "I was interested in working someplace where making money isn't everything. As enforcers, we try to find the right balance between food production and a clean and safe environment."

His favorite part of the job? "The people. I especially enjoy working with the county agricultural commissioners," he said. "They are the salt of the earth and fun people to be around. I also enjoy my staff. They really know their stuff and keep me out of trouble."

His least favorite? "The paperwork."

Tom was born in San Mateo, but moved to Corning at the age of three months when his father took over the family olive farm in the small Tehama County community of Corning. He and his two older brothers helped with the chores. "We were irrigators, pruners, we suckered the trees, stacked the brush ... we did whatever needed to be done," he recalled.

When Tom selected the University of California at Davis for his higher education, he wanted to be an environmental toxicologist and entomologist. He changed direction after recognizing he didn't want to work in a laboratory. His undergraduate degree is in integrated pest management and his master's is in plant protection and pest management.

After graduating, he went to work for Newhall Land and Farming – the largest agricultural land owner in California at the time. In the Chico area, he drove tractors and planted and sprayed almonds for \$5 an hour for six months. As part of his dream to become a farm adviser, he next went to work for Bill Fischer, the then-Fresno County weed farm adviser, for a couple of years.

Through Fischer, Tom became acquainted with Larry Burtch, chief agronomist for Spreckels Sugar in Mendota. When Burtch retired, he hired Tom to replace him with this caveat: "Sugarbeets are not a lucrative business. This will be a good job for a year or two."

The job lasted 15 years. Tom worked in Mendota for five years before transferring to the company's Woodland site because he wanted to return to Northern California. At Spreckels, he supervised applied field research to improve production practices for sugarbeet growers.

Tom's interest in DPR as a career was sparked when he applied for and received a grant from the department on behalf of the Sugarbeet Pest Management Alliance. The purpose of the \$88,841 grant was to evaluate alternative sugarbeet insect pest management with reduced-risk pesticides to control armyworms in Imperial and Fresno counties for two years beginning in mid-1999.

The transition from private industry to state worker included taking a state exam to qualify for a DPR position and learning the lingo. "Programmatic – I had never heard that word before," he laughed. "Working for the state is a whole different style."

Before moving to pesticide enforcement, Tom worked in DPR's Pest Management Analysis and Planning Program as a lead over both the Pest Management Alliance Grants and School and Childcare Integrated Pest Management programs.

The tempo at enforcement is fast. Water quality is a key environmental issue in the Northern Regional Office. Tom is also focused on ensuring that pesticide laws are enforced uniformly throughout the state. The department works with county agricultural commissioners to ensure that growers are aware of regulations and have the needed information to protect workers and the environment.

"Everything comes at you ... balancing pesticide issues with the environment and keeping farmers doing what they do best," he said. "I try not to look at issues from a perspective of black and white. If there is an issue with a grower, we talk with the county agricultural commissioner to reach a consensus on the best thing to do. We try to be reasonable and practical when enforcing regulations."

One of Tom's pet peeves is unlicensed maintenance gardeners. He has high hopes for a pilot program in San Luis Obispo County funded by a DPR Alliance Grant intended to educate maintenance gardeners that they need a license from DPR if they use pesticides, and about integrated pest management practices and alternatives to pesticides.

Tom and his wife, Janice, live in Dixon and have two children. Leni, 24, is a graduate of Columbia University who lives in New York and wants to go to law school. Becky, 22, is studying wildlife management and art at Humboldt State University.

Tom described himself as an "avid gardener who produces his own food on a city lot." He also enjoys writing and recently took up bicycling. He often takes the bus to work -- 24 miles one way -- and cycles home and recently completed his first metric century.

*Contact: Lea Brooks, DPR Communications Director, [lbrooks@cdpr.ca.gov](mailto:lbrooks@cdpr.ca.gov), 916-445-3974*



Tom Babb