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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Mother Nature Doesn't Stop Dried Plum Farmers

YUBA CITY, CA, November 8, 2004 – Undaunted by the worst crop failure since 1918, a group of California farmers is launching a major strategic initiative based on a recently completed economic study to improve the marketing of dried plums.

The study, funded by the US Department of Agriculture, has prompted the group to launch an outreach campaign to improve the ways farmers sell their dried plum crops. The farmers, members of Prune Bargaining Association (PBA), initiated the project, Stronger Contracts for Stronger Farms, through a Rural Business Enterprise Grant. The Yuba-Sutter Economic Development Corporation obtained the grant in order to help the farmers strengthen their marketing options and improve the local economy.

Unfortunately, Mother Nature had different ideas and the farmers have been impacted by a nearly complete crop failure. “This years’ crop was only 25% of normal,” stated Greg Thompson, general manager of the Association. Typically, California produces between 160,000 to 170,000 tons a year.

“This crop failure puts at risk some 560 full time jobs and 4,765 part-time jobs in the north state,” said Tim Johnson, Executive Director of the Corporation.

In addition to the crop failure, growers have been aggravated by depressed prices and non-payment for crops brought on by worldwide over-production, unfair tariffs, and subsidized foreign production. In spite of the crop failure and the resulting elimination of oversupply, the farmers are moving ahead with recommendations from the study to band together with other growers to improve business practices and ultimately increase the market for California dried plums.

The dried plum farmers, through their cooperative bargaining association, have committed themselves to address the problems identified in the study. Besides contract violations and lack of payment, other trouble areas identified by the study include a low level of participation in collective bargaining and a lack of widespread appreciation of the value of collective bargaining and price discovery to the economic well being of producers. ‘Everyone knows there is strength in unity,’ explains Keith Larrabee, the bargaining association president, “but farmers are notorious for their

independence. With so many farmers suffering from similar troubles, this study helps demonstrate in tangible ways what lack of unity is costing all of us.”

The project identified 8 areas of concern that have a negative impact on dried plum farmers and more than a dozen ways to address the most pressing problems within the scope of growers to influence. A feasibility analysis was made of each potential solution to identify the actions most likely to help solve dried plum farmers difficulties in marketing their crops. “What the study showed us is that time and again across many different commodities, that farmer education and unified action and participation is key,” related Greg Thompson, association manager. “Just having a home or a contract is no longer a guarantee of success. We have seen from this study and from our own bitter experiences that just turning a crop over to a packer or to a co-op is not the end of the story. Farmers must remain involved in order to protect their interests.”

The farmers have already implemented a number of suggestions made in the study including forming a marketing pool, bargaining for payment terms, and working to strengthen contracts. “The study gave us new hope and direction when things looked very bleak,” says Larrabee. “That energy helped us respond to this year’s crop failure in positive ways and we set a new price bench mark for dried plums.”

Now that harvest is over, the bargaining group is turning their efforts to reaching out to other dried plum farmers. The farmers hope to convince as many others as possible to join with them in solving their common problems. Each board member of the bargaining association has committed to contacting growers in their local area. “One of the first orders of business is to unite farmers,” said Thompson. “In order to tackle these issues, it takes an organized effort and a broad base of support. A few growers by themselves are not going to be able to get the job done.”

While uniting farmers may seem like a tall order, the group is undaunted. “When farmers go to their neighbors and discuss their common interests, remarkable things can happen,” says Larrabee. “If farmers unite, we expect that dried plum prices can be strong for the next several years, but the same basic problems of the past will remain if they don’t. If anything, our experience of the past several years has taught us that it is no longer going to be business as usual in farming dried plums. Growers are responding and taking action. We need to seize this opportunity to get the industry back on the right track.”

The Prune Bargaining Association was formed in 1968 as a grower-owned cooperative to improve the economy of the California prune industry, encourage the production of a quality product and provide a forum for growers to exchange ideas regarding the industry. The PBA establishes the industry’s raw product price for prunes.

The Yuba-Sutter Economic Development Corporation was formed in 1994 to help business and industry, specifically agriculture become more successful by diversifying its crops and sustaining growth.