

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
ROBERT RIVAS, CHAIR
ASSEMBLYMEMBER, THIRTIETH DISTRICT

**Panelist Biographies for Assembly Committee on Agriculture's
Farmer Equity Informational Hearing**

Thea Rittenhouse joined the Department of Food and Agriculture in September 2018 as the Farmer Equity Advisor. Prior to CDFA, she has spent her entire career working with both urban and rural agricultural organizations and directly with farmers, in addition to being a farmer herself. From school and community gardens to statewide farm to school organizations, she has dedicated her career to all aspects of agriculture. Just prior to joining CDFA, she worked with an agricultural non-profit organization to provide, technical assistance, training and resources for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. She co-organized the first Latino Farmer conference in 2015, the first Spanish language agricultural conference in California. She holds a Masters Degree in Community Development and Sustainable Ag/Food systems from UC Davis, and focused her thesis on farmworkers in organic agriculture. She and her partner farm 15 acres of diversified vegetables and berries and care for a small orchard in Yolo County.

Ruth Dahlquist-Willard is the Small Farms and Specialty Crops Advisor for UC Cooperative Extension in Fresno and Tulare Counties. She coordinates an extension program supporting small-scale, diversified, and socially disadvantaged farmers through individual extension support, bilingual outreach and training in Hmong, Lao, Spanish, and Punjabi, research on small-acreage specialty crops, and policy engagement. Extension efforts include production issues for specialty crops such as pest and nutrient management, access to markets and financial resources, and regulatory compliance. She has coordinated technical assistance for small-scale farmers in Fresno and Tulare Counties to receive funding from state incentives programs, resulting in over \$4 million in grants awarded to Southeast Asian, Latino, and African American farmers. She received the Agricultural Professional Climate and Agriculture Leadership Award from the California Climate and Agriculture Network in 2019 for assisting socially disadvantaged farmers to access incentives programs for water and energy savings and the IPM Achievement Award from the California Department of Pesticide Regulation in 2018 as part of a team researching biosolarization as an alternative to fumigation. Her collaborative policy efforts have resulted in several changes to regulatory and incentives programs, including revised reporting requirements for the Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program for small-scale and diversified farms and improving access for limited-resource farmers to CDFA's Climate Smart Agriculture programs. She has served as a co-chair of the UCANR Small Farms Workgroup and is currently the co-leader of the Diversified Farming and Food Systems Program Team.

Michael Yang is the Hmong Agricultural Assistant for the University of California Cooperative Extension small farms extension program in Fresno County. He has supported communities of immigrant, refugee, and underserved small-scale farmers for the past 27 years, building trusted relationships with Hmong, Lao, Mien, Cambodian, Thai, Latino, and African American growers. Michael provides bilingual, one-on-one extension support for approximately 500 farmers annually with on-farm production issues, farmers market sales, regulatory compliance across a range of programs, and access to financial resources, as well as application to and implementation of Climate Smart Agriculture projects. He holds an AA degree in Business Management from Phillips Junior College and is certified as a Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) trainer for the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule and as a pesticide safety trainer through the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) and the University of California Integrated Pest Management Program (UC IPM). He is fluent in Hmong, Lao, and English and is recognized statewide for his translations of educational material into Hmong for workshops, presentations, extension publications, and video scripts. He hosts a weekly radio broadcast in Hmong based in Fresno that reaches from Bakersfield to Sacramento. Michael also served as the director of the Hmong American Cooperative from 1996 – 1998. He received the Pedro Ilic Agriculture Outstanding Educator Award in 2000 for his commitment to supporting small-scale and family farmers and a STAR (Staff Appreciation and Recognition) award from UC ANR in 2020 for his outstanding performance as an extension educator.

Patricia Rodriguez and her husband Rosario are the owners of Rodriguez Farms Inc. in Castroville, California. Like so many other farmworkers who worked in the fields, her story began with the goal to one day own a business in something she was familiar with, which eventually turned out to be strawberries.

She picked berries alongside her parents and grew up on a farm in Watsonville, California. She married Rosario, who also worked at the same farm with his family, and they soon ventured into the farming world. The first ten years were difficult because there were many aspects of the strawberry industry they were not familiar with and without working capital, credit or references the doors were closed to many essential items needed to succeed as a strawberry grower.

They became resourceful in ways to get things done, borrowing and purchasing used equipment from other farmers, keeping their full-time jobs and searching for a property owner that would be willing to lease them the land for their strawberry farm. After ten years of “on-the-job-training” as growers, they quickly learned that while their operation was still growing, there were other hurdles that kept them from feeling capable as farmers. One of these challenges happened when their customers

wanted certified organic berries. This process took more time to learn and experiment at the risk of losing even more money. After four years of trials and tribulations, they finally felt comfortable growing good quality organic strawberries to offer to their customers who began to purchase them in droves.

While they still continue to learn, experiment and make changes to grow the best berries. Throughout their journey, the California Strawberry Commission, local Agricultural Commissioner's office, CCOF and USDA have provided guidance and support. They are proud to say they have established a customer base at over 50 certified farmers' markets in the Bay Area and also take their strawberries to Berry People, a broker who sells to the top organic grocery outlets.

Doria Robinson is a 3rd generation resident of Richmond, California and the Executive Director of Urban Tilth, a community-based organization rooted in Richmond dedicated to cultivating urban agriculture to help our community build a more sustainable, healthy, and just food system. Urban Tilth hires and trains residents to work with schools, community-based organizations, government agencies, businesses, and individuals to develop the capacity to produce 5% of our own food supply.

Formally trained as a Watershed Restoration Ecologist, Doria has also worked on organic farms in Western Massachusetts where she attended Hampshire at Veritable Vegetable a woman owned organic produce Distribution Company, Real Food Company, and Mixed Nuts Food Co-op. She is passionate about exploring her work from the perspective that physical, social and economic health is dependent upon ecological health; the restoration of one depends on the restoration of the other.

Mai Nguyen is an heirloom grain and Southeast Asian crop farm owner-operator who has long balanced farming and farmer community organizing to address the greatest challenges of our time: climate change and social inequality. They use rotational grazing, dry farm, low-till, and ecological farming methods to bring food directly to communities. Off farm, they developed immigrant-owned agricultural cooperatives and worker-owned cooperative farms as means of economic democracy and food justice. Mai co-founded the California Grain Campaign to establish a robust California whole grain economy and the Asian American Farmers Alliance, a mutual aid network. In 2017, Mai helped pass the Farmer Equity Act--a momentous civil rights bill for California agriculture, and subsequently, as the California Organizer, then Director of the National Young Farmers Coalition, trained farmers of color to engage in policy advocacy and run for elected positions. Mai is currently co-Director of Minnow, an organization focused on land tenure for farmers of color with respect for indigenous sovereignty. Mai has been recognized for their work as a Berkeley Food Institute Changemaker, Grist 50 Fixer, and Rachel's Network Catalyst.