



# Meet the Nevada Department of Agriculture Communications and Promotions Team

By Amanda K. Wartgow

**I**n 2011, Jim Barbee became the director of the Nevada Department of Agriculture, which had gone through the economic crash of 2009, and the ensuing budget cuts of the state organization. Since then, Barbee has helped to grow the Department's marketing team to help advance Nevada's agriculture. In January of 2013, the position of International Marketing Coordinator was filled by Jeff Sutich. Soon after, the legislature approved and funded several more positions in order to form a more rounded and ideal team consisting of the International Marketing Coordinator, a Public Information Officer, an Information and Education Officer, and an Agriculture Literacy Coordinator. Additionally, two interns from the University of Nevada, Reno joined the team, and as of March 2014, the team was completely hired.

Although very new to the Nevada Department of Agriculture, the team does not lack in experience.

Dr. Bob Conrad, the Public Information Officer, was previously the Director of Marketing and Communications at the University of Nevada, Reno, College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources from 2000-2006. This experience helped Dr. Conrad with the role of University research and the connections to education and agriculture that wouldn't have been possible with his more urban background.

"I'm 'new' to ag; I hadn't really been a part of it until that point," he says. This also put him in a position to be a part of Nevada agriculture and what the industry had been through over the last few decades.

Jeff Sutich is the International Marketing Coordinator. Sutich worked as an economist for the Nevada Department of Employment, Training, and Rehabilitation, as well as a global trade specialist for the Nevada Governor's Office of Economic Development, before joining the Department of Agriculture team. Sutich focuses on helping expand the Nevada food and agriculture sectors' export sales internationally by assisting companies with their international business plans and market research. Additionally, Sutich helps inform companies of the benefits of expanding or relocating to Nevada.

"Nevada is an upcoming competitor in the food and agriculture global market place," he says. "Our companies have huge potential in expanding their businesses by accessing it. There is global demand for U.S. food and agriculture products, and I'm excited to see our companies take part of the market share. Even if you're a small company, it doesn't hurt to diversify into additional markets."

Tatjana Vukovic is the Agriculture Information and Education Officer. Her professional history includes working in the Department of Employment Training and Rehabilitation's Governor's Workforce Solution Unit, and doing research for Governor's Office of Economic Development. Her background helped to familiarize her with agricultural industries as well as the research component.

"Agriculture is a misrepresented industry in Nevada, and you can find information on almost any other industry except agriculture, and that is one of the challenges that I really like – to be able to collect that information and put it into some meaningful way to present why agriculture is so important to Nevada," she says.

Mackenzie Campbell, a student at the University of Nevada, Reno, is the Department's intern from the Western United States Agriculture Trade Association (WUSATA), an association that matches companies with markets abroad. She is graduating next year with a Business degree.

Amber Smyer is the Agriculture Literacy Coordinator. She received her Bachelor's degree in Agriculture Education and has a Master's degree in Public Affairs. Her emphasis is on education and outreach to help the public and youth understand the importance of agriculture.

"My background is in agriculture and education, so this was the perfect mix that al-

lowed me to stay in an industry that I love and that I am passionate about. It's exciting to come together as a team to creatively and collaboratively promote, train and educate on Nevada food and agriculture," she says.

The team as a whole shares a strong belief that the general public is disconnected from where their food comes from. As Conrad explains, "we are not really educated as a society to be literate in agriculture because we are so far removed from the food that we eat," and his hope is to start to bridge that knowledge gap in Nevada's urban areas.

One of the new programs that this team has released is titled "Buy Nevada." At its basic level, it is a merchandise branding program, but really it is so much more than that. What the team wanted to accomplish was to build a database of all the organizations and operations involved in Nevada agriculture.

They feature products that are grown, processed, distributed, and sold in the state. It is almost like a roadmap of products from where they were grown, to where they were

processed, to where they were sold. Buy Nevada offers several memberships for producers the first of which is bronze, which is a free membership that includes a listing on their website buynevada.org.

The membership goes up to gold and platinum, which entail more advertising such as promotional videos, and as Campbell says, the team will "shamelessly" promote their products at any event they attend. This program not only benefits those involved in Nevada agriculture but also its consumers. It provides a one-stop shop as to where to find Nevada products in your area. This program is not built on the buy local or organic movement but rather on Nevada's entire food and agriculture sectors – whether sold in state or abroad. It truly shows how far Nevada reaches.

The latest outreach event for the marketing team was Sutich, Smyer and Conrad attended the

Clark County fair. They were working on the ground trying to promote Nevada agriculture businesses and organizations.

"We're pretty beat right now," says Conrad while taking a sip of his black coffee, talking about working multiple 16-hour days straight. Their recent trip to the Clark County Fair was one example of how they promoted Nevada organizations.

Conrad explains that everyone from the "local foodie" to the "buy American" type seemed impressed with the idea of the "Buy Nevada" program and the benefits to the consumer. By default, this in turn helped to promote all organizations within the program, leading people to the website to see for themselves where they can buy Nevada products and learn about operations within the state.

Another new promotion from this team is the new Nevada Agriculture license plate design. The idea was to create a plate that was more inclusive of all who would like to promote Nevada products, not just those within the agriculture community. If you buy the plate, half of the proceeds go to Nevada FFA and the other half go to the Nevada Department of Agriculture to promote Nevada agriculture.

One area they would like to improve is the documentation of Nevada agriculture. The team would like to focus on the collection of data in order to gain a better understanding of agriculture within the state. Once that data is collected, they can sculpt it into something that can be used to educate the public. Smyer, the Agriculture Literacy Coordinator, will be working with the Farm Bureau and agriculture in the classroom to create a program to do just that – educate the public on Nevada agriculture.

The Nevada Department of Agriculture has been placed in more of an outreach role, at least more so than in recent decades due to the negative impact the economy had on University extension and other agriculture programs. This in turn promoted the strong emphasis on this team and their contributions towards the promotion of Nevada agriculture. With the support they have received from the state, this newly formed team seems well equipped to potentially change the public's view of Nevada and the state's progress in the agriculture arena.

