

Corralitos grower Ken Kimes named Santa Cruz County's Farmer of the Year

By Shanna McCord Santa Cruz Sentinel Santa Cruz Sentinel

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WATSONVILLE -- Longtime Corralitos sprout grower Ken Kimes was named farmer of the year by the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau during the group's 96th annual dinner on Thursday.

"This is really stunning, really flooring," he said after the award was announced. "Agriculture has been really good to me.

"This really shouldn't be my award. My wife deserves it, too. It should be our award or her award."

Kimes, 62, a leader in the early organic movement and on the forefront of growing mustard as an alternative fuel, was chosen by the farm bureau's board of directors for his dedication to the agriculture industry and local community since 1982.

More than 200 people attended the event, held at Rancho Santa Maria on Hecker Pass Road.

Kimes was honored by lawmakers from each city in the county, the county Board of Supervisors, state lawmakers and Rep. Sam Farr.

"Ken was just a unanimous decision," said Jess Brown, farm bureau executive director. "He's a very calm type of person. He handles everything so calmly and professionally. And he's always helping beyond his own ranch."

Kimes, owner of New Natives, has a prosthetic arm and hook after losing his right forearm and left fingers in a farming accident in August 2010.

The accident happened as he reached into a screw conveyor to retrieve something from the device, and within seconds his right hand was sucked into the machinery.

Thanks to immediate medical attention from the Corralitos-based Cal Fire unit and surgery at a trauma hospital in San Jose, Kimes was able to regain strength in his left hand and become efficient with the prosthetic.

Catherine Barr, manager of the Aptos Farmers Market, has known Kimes for 20 years.

She said he returned to his farmers market booth less than three months after the accident.

Barr held a fundraiser dinner at her home in 2010 to help him cover some of the medical costs. The strong turnout, she said, signaled his importance to the area's small farming community.

"Not one person said they couldn't give," Barr said. "That says something about Ken's character."

Farming runs in the family.

Kimes' grandfather and great-grandfather grew plums in Fresno beginning in the early 1900s. The plum

farm was lost after shipping the fruit to the East Coast and never getting paid.

His father sold farm machinery in Southern California until the family's farmland was sold for homes and businesses.

Kimes started New Natives after moving to Santa Cruz with his wife Sandra in the early 1980s. The organic sprouts are grown in a 40,000-square-foot greenhouse.

In addition to sprouts, Kimes is a founder of Farm Fuel, which was started in 2007 to grow mustard for biofuel.

The company sells mustard seed as an organic fertilizer.

Kimes' award was announced on Thursday by last year's winner, cowboy John Pisturino.

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