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Has Modoc fair lost its mojo?

In debt, north state county ends traditional agricultural event

Department of Food and Agriculture withdrew general fund support

But new ideas and some serious new thought may keep the fair alive

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

jblittle@dyerpress.com

Say goodbye to cotton candy, mud races and sheepdog trials. The Modoc County Fair has bit the dust.

The three-day August event, which once boasted a \$400,000 budget, ended the fiscal year hopelessly in debt with no viable revenue sources on the horizon. Its employees – both of them – were terminated.

For city and country attendees, county fairs represent the best of rural America: apple pie à la 4-H calf auctions, judged quilt displays and competition to grow the largest sunflower. There's magic for everyone: carnival rides and jostling crowds for kids, nostalgia for adults.

Ending the Modoc fair “rips the heart right out of the community,” said Dannette DePaul, who served as its manager from 2007 until last week.

Operating the annual event has always been a financial challenge, but Modoc and other counties got by as long as the state provided nearly two-thirds of the revenue. That ended in 2012, when the California Department of Food and Agriculture withdrew general fund support for the state's 77 local fairs. Forced to

go it alone, about 10 rural county fairs are on a death-watch list; Modoc's is the first to succumb.

It's easy to blame the state for once again snubbing the under-represented far northern counties and abandoning a tradition treasured as a symbol of their independent spirit. And here – in the cradle of the State of Jefferson where Modoc was the second county to endorse state secession – many do.

But the issues that brought down the Modoc County fair are closer to home than Sacramento. Economic decline, which began in the 1970s with the timber industry crash, continues. As in neighboring counties, countywide unemployment hovers between 8 and 10 percent, with occasional spikes toward 20 percent. The [population has dropped in all of the far northern counties](#) except Humboldt, where it grew by a whopping 0.1 percent between 2010 and 2014.

Shrinking population nationwide is making nonurban areas less politically significant. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, arguably the nation's head cheerleader for rural America, took his constituents to task for their apathetic response to their growing irrelevance: "How are you going to encourage young people to want to be involved in rural America or farming if you don't have a proactive message?"

Modoc County and its neighbors suffer from the cascade of symptoms common to their counterparts across the country: international competition for the red-meat market, which remains an economic mainstay; diminishing opportunities for young people, leading to "brain drain"; declining population and its erosion of local goods and services. Hanging over all of this is a stubborn resistance to change, particularly if it's proposed by a newcomer or an outsider.

Is this simply the end of the ride for rural county fairs?

Not so fast, says Modoc County Supervisor David Allan. He represents Surprise Valley, home to what he proudly calls "the most beautiful fairgrounds anywhere." His fix for the county generally, and the fair in particular, jibes with Vilsack: ideas – new ideas and some serious new thought by new and younger leaders. If the Modoc fair has lost its mojo, it may be because an increasingly geriatric population can't be bothered to drive 50 miles for a \$6 corn dog and a greased pig contest.

Allan has anted up with suggestions that range from the conventional to the wacky. Along with turning the fairgrounds into a year-round event center, he has proposed bringing disabled veterans to the fair's spacious grounds, where they could learn animal husbandry and grow gardens.

That won't bring back the watermelon-eating contest or horse shows, but the excitement of new ideas and innovative implementation just might revive the magic of the Modoc County fair. Don't throw away that team-roping belt buckle just yet!

Jane Braxton Little, a freelance writer, covers science, natural resources and rural Northern California from Plumas County.