

The Sacramento Bee

THURSDAY

July 1, 1999

B

METRO

# Retiring expert shed new light on farm labor

By Edgar Sanchez  
Bee Staff Writer

Two decades ago, the public knew little about the workings of California's agricultural industry, one of the top industries in the state.

Nothing would change, Don Villarejo believed, unless the farm fields were cultivated for raw data.

From the seed of that idea, he helped

establish the California Institute for Rural Studies in Davis, serving as executive director from its inception in 1977 until 5 p.m. Wednesday, when he retired.

During his 22 years at the helm, the nonprofit research institute conducted more than 100 studies on topics ranging from farm pesticides, mechanization and water supplies to worker health and safety. Along the way, he earned the respect not only of farm laborers, but of many

growers in the \$25 billion industry.

"I've given 22 years of my life to building this organization . . . and when I leave, there'll be a big hole in my heart," Villarejo, 62, said this week. "But the work will go forward, because the institute has a great staff."

He won't be alone in his Davis home. His wife, Merna Villarejo, a professor of biochemistry at the University of California, Davis, also retired Wednesday.

Don Villarejo's departure won't be permanent. After a year's travel and rest, he plans to return to the institute as a part-time consultant. The institute's new director is David Lighthall, formerly a professor of environmental geography at Calgate University.

Villarejo's tenure was applauded by agencies at opposite ends of the farm sec-

Please see VILLAREJO, page B5



As longtime executive director of the Davis-based California Institute for Rural Studies, Don Villarejo earned the respect not only of farm laborers but of many growers in the \$25 billion agricultural industry.

Bee photograph/  
Hector Amezcua

## Villarejo: He'll return as consultant

Continued from page B1

Marc Grossman, lobbyist for the United Farm Workers Union, said Villarejo broke new ground by talking to farm workers.

"He's one of the few farm-labor experts from academia who really knows what he's talking about," Grossman said. "We haven't always agreed with Don. At times, he's been a critic of the UFW, but we've always respected him."

Villarejo shed light on areas that other researchers ignored, said Clark Biggs, spokesman for the California Farm Bureau.

"Probably many of his studies have helped rural residents and the rural community," Biggs said. "He did a lot of research to call to light what actually was going on."

Trained as a physicist, Villarejo taught physics at UCLA for seven years. In 1975, his wife accepted a teaching post at UC Davis, prompting the family's move to Northern California that year. He

soon became a part-time physics lecturer at UC Davis. He also served a brief stint as a volunteer for the United Farm Workers.

About this time, Villarejo saw "a major need" to study the agriculture business. "There needed to be a research organization to carefully monitor the growth, trends and changes in this enormous industry," he said. The resulting institute opened modestly, with a staff of three volunteers. Meeting the payroll was easy at first, he joked, "because it was zero."

He taught at UC Davis for seven years, until he began to draw a salary at the institute. The articulate Villarejo became someone for news agencies to call when farm news broke. Along with cogent quotes, he provided a candid, but objective perspective on events.

In a 1991 interview, he said that consumers see only California's luscious fruits and vegetables, rarely the reality of those who pick them.

"The public doesn't have a clue about what really goes on out in the fields," Villarejo said, referring to the abuse of farm laborers.

Since 1977, Villarejo has raised several million dollars in grants for the institute, which today has a budget of more than \$650,000. It has a paid staff of 11, along with two interns and 14 independent contractors.

Villarejo said California's 700,000 farm workers also have come a long way since the 1970s, partly because of the work of the late Cesar Chavez.

Asked whether his own work helped farm laborers, Villarejo said, "That's for history to decide. It would be presumptuous of me to make any claims. But there's no question that today we know more and there's more public discussion and focus on issues that we have worked on over the years."

Bee staff writer Paul Schnitt contributed to this report.