



Photographs by ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

Prized crop falls on hard times

Fast-growing asparagus once flourished in California. Now, few acres are in production, a collapse driven by labor costs and foreign competition.

By CINDY CARCAMO
REPORTING FROM FIREBAUGH, CALIF.

It was a late March morning and dozens of women and men descended on a San Joaquin Valley asparagus farm — one of the last in the state. The workers walked along the furrows, cutting the newly sprouted spears at precisely nine inches, a market standard.

Later that day, farmer Aaron Barcellos surveyed the land peppered with the perennial that for many announces the arrival of spring. He is one of the last producers in California, a fourth-generation farmer who co-owns A-Bar Ag Enterprises in Firebaugh.

The 59-year-old picked a firm stalk from the ground. He pointed to its tightly braided tips and beefy stem.

“This is beautiful ‘grass,’ ” Barcellos said, a nickname growers often use for asparagus, although it’s not considered a true grass.

“Every spear of asparagus you see in the store is hand cut by an individual,” he said, referring to his own 120 workers.

The labor required to harvest the crop is partly why Barcellos fears for the future of asparagus. Once considered the king of veg-



NEILL CALLIS, who co-manages Turlock Fruit Co., moves a box of asparagus at a packinghouse in Firebaugh, Calif.

etables in California agriculture and a seasonal delicacy exported worldwide, asparagus is on the decline here — the industry succumbing to the pressures of the global market, largely because of labor costs.

At asparagus’ most recent peak in 2000, California farmers harvested 37,000 acres of the vegetable, according to the state Department of Food and Agriculture. About 10% of that acreage has been lost every year since. Now there are fewer than 3,000 acres of asparagus left in the Golden State, according to the latest available data.

Even the annual San Joaquin Asparagus Festival has been affected. This year, only one local farm provided spears for the cooking demos and Asparagus Alley, where festival-goers indulge in such treats as deep fried asparagus and asparagus ice cream.

How this happened can be read as a cautionary tale for California agriculture at large, farmers and asparagus industry insiders said.

Currently, just three conventional or [See Asparagus, A9]

Confusion and criticism engulf Gascón’s office

State prosecution of one of his top aides is latest controversy for the embattled D.A.

By JAMES QUEALLY
AND KERI BLAKINGER

When one of Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. George Gascón’s top advisors was charged with 11 felonies last month, his critics were quick to pounce.

Though Gascón himself has not been charged with any wrongdoing, the case against Assistant Dist. Atty. Diana Teran has set off the latest in a seemingly endless wave of controversies for the embattled progressive as he seeks a second term.

Teran is accused of improperly downloading confidential police records in 2018 — while she was the constitutional policing advisor to the L.A. County Sheriff’s Department — and then making improper use of the data

when she joined the D.A.’s office in 2021.

The D.A.’s detractors have described the charges as further evidence of Gascón’s mismanagement of the nation’s largest prosecutor’s office, arguing Teran was one of many outside hires he should not have made. Gascón’s November election opponent, Nathan Hochman, pointed to the charges as an indictment of Gascón’s decision-making and questioned if the D.A. “blessed” the alleged mis-

conduct.

Gascón’s allies and some legal experts, however, have cried foul, questioning whether California Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta overstepped and is effectively punishing Teran for carrying out the D.A.’s police accountability agenda.

State prosecutors have not specified what documents Teran allegedly took or what she did with them, leaving an information vacuum. Teran is not due in court until July, and the affidavit

that would lay out more about her alleged actions was filed under seal, meaning clarity on the charges is not imminent.

Teran’s defense attorney, James Spertus, said his client is being prosecuted for uploading the information to a database of law enforcement officers whose credibility could be called into question at trial. The database is commonly referred to as a “Brady list,” in reference to a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court [See Teran, A7]

Singer apologizes after video shows attack

Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs’ violent behavior is likely to add more urgency to an inquiry.

By RICHARD WINTON
AND ALEXANDRA DEL ROSARIO

A video showing music legend Sean “Diddy” Combs violently attacking his then-girlfriend in a Los Angeles hotel in 2016 has put the embattled star in heightened peril as he faces a federal sex-trafficking investigation.

The video shows Combs



KATHY WILLENS AP

SEAN “Diddy” Combs said his behavior in 2016 video was “inexcusable.”

chasing, kicking, dragging and hurling a glass vase at Cassie, a singer whose real name is Cassandra Ventura. It corroborates parts of a civil lawsuit Ventura filed against Combs last year, which was settled a day after it was filed in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York.

Allegations against Combs have piled up in recent years and he has steadfastly denied wrongdoing, including when Ventura filed her suit. But after facing intense backlash, Combs on Sunday posted a video on Instagram in which he apologized for his behavior in the

video.

“It’s so difficult to reflect on the darkest times in your life, but sometimes you got to do that,” he said. “My behavior on that video is inexcusable.”

Combs said he entered “therapy and rehab” after the incident. “I take full responsibility for my actions in that video. I’m disgusted. I was disgusted then when I did it. I’m disgusted now,” he said.

The video is not related to the federal investigation, but it has drawn more attention to the ongoing investigation.

Law enforcement [See Combs, A6]

Copter in crash likely carried Iran’s president

Other officials also were apparently aboard when it went down in a mountainous area shrouded in fog. **WORLD, A3**

Bail is urged for alleged gangster

Prosecutors say member of Mexican Mafia was caught on a wiretap boasting of several murders. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

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WNBA star rises amid questions

Caitlin Clark has attracted a new wave of support for league, but race and equity concerns swirl. **SPORTS, D1**

Coppola stands by ‘Megalopolis’

At Cannes, the director shrugs off critics of his self-financed speculative epic. **CALENDAR, E1**

Weather

Sunny and cool. L.A. Basin: 68/55. **B5**



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