



# Central Coast Farm & Ranch

SUMMER 2021

## They bought the farm

*New owners embrace ag landmark*

+ No containment in sight as box costs soar



# heavy lifting

*Ag executive applies brain and brawn in nonprofit boardrooms, trenches*

BY KIM LAMB GREGORY ///  
KAREN QUINCY LOBERG PHOTOS



Hannah Wirz volunteers at a Food Share distribution at Rio Mesa High School in April.

As head of North America Product Supply for Bayer Crop Science, Hannah Wirz never loses sight of why she works with her team to produce and export seed to a global market.

“It’s about the people,” Wirz said. “Bayer’s mission is ‘Health for all, hunger for none.’”

The same motto could apply to the time she carves out to volunteer for causes that are important to her — especially in a pandemic.

“You’re busy, but you find time for things you are passionate about,” she said.

Recently named to the board of directors for Food Share, she also serves on the board of the Ventura County Chapter of the American Red Cross of Central California. She is a past board member for El Concilio Family Services.

In the boardroom, she shares her expertise as an agriculture executive. In the nonprofit trenches, she packs boxes, directs traffic, hands out water bottles, or anything else that’s necessary.

## **Rolling up her sleeves**

“She is a trusted adviser and I go to her a lot just to ground things. As my vice chair, she steps in at a moment’s notice,” said Tony Briggs, chief executive officer at Red Cross of Central California. “She is also willing to roll up her sleeves and do the work.”

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*“People have no idea where their food comes from ... and the risks farmers take.”*

**Hannah Wirz**  
Head of North American Product Supply, Bayer Crop Science and Food Share volunteer

### Heavy lifting

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With the pandemic, Wirz believes the missions of all three of these organizations have never been more critical.

At Food Share, for example ... “We went from delivering 13 million pounds of food in 2019 to 26 million pounds in 2020,” said Food Share President and CEO Monica White. “There are a lot of newly unemployed people who never expected they would need food assistance.”

When White took the helm at the food bank in 2017, Wirz was among the first people White wanted as a board member.

“Hannah and I had served on the Red Cross board together, and I knew how valuable she was,” White said. “She’s intelligent, professional and has incredible knowledge in agriculture.”

At Bayer, Wirz oversees teams who produce 22 types of vegetable seeds in the United States and Mexico, with approximately 15 seed crops cleaned and packaged at Bayer’s Oxnard processing plant. The other seven are processed in

Idaho and Washington.

Those handled in Oxnard include spinach, carrots, onions, peppers, tomatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli and lettuce. Once the seeds are washed and prepared, they are exported to 60 countries.

“I really love agriculture,” Wirz said. “It’s so underappreciated. People have no idea where their food comes from. They have no idea the risks farmers take, especially with what’s happening with the climate. ... I have never met a farmer who does not care deeply about their crop and their livestock and their land.”

### Beginnings in Dubai

Wirz’s love of agriculture came later in her life, following her upbringing in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Her parents, both physicians, relocated from India in the 1960s to help fortify the developing city’s medical community in what was then a sand-swept outpost.

“There was nothing there at the time,” Wirz said. “I was born there, my brother was born there. My parents stayed there 30 years, then retired and went back to India.”

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Wirz, née Zachariah, finished high school in England, then enrolled in Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, to study business in 1992.

Wirz met her husband, Bill Wirz, after transferring to Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where she earned her MBA in 1998.

Monsanto hired Wirz that same year, launching her 23-year career in agriculture. When the company moved into the seed business, she accepted an offer to relocate to Monsanto's Oxnard office in 2012 and her family settled in Westlake Village. Bayer bought Monsanto in 2018.

Wirz began volunteering for the Red Cross more than six years ago.

"Growing up outside the U.S., the Red Cross has an amazing brand," Wirz said. "It's an honor to volunteer for them."

#### Unsung hero

Her willingness to do whatever is needed earned Wirz the local Red Cross's Unsung Hero Award in March.

She joined the board of El Concilio after meeting Executive Director Yvonne Gutierrez at a local event. The nonprofit often assists farmworker families, and Wirz was happy to support those who do this backbreaking work.

"If we don't have people who will do this work, we will starve," Wirz said. "Our farmworkers are critical to everything we eat, to the fabric of our society."

Wirz passed along the spirit of volunteerism to her children, Zacariah, 18, and Katherine, 15, who pack boxes alongside their mother at Food Share.

"I love to see people's faces when you have helped them," Katherine said. "It teaches me I am very lucky to have what I have and I should do what I can for others."

Whatever turbulence the nation and the world face, Wirz believes she will always find clarity in worthy causes.

"This is not politics," she said. "This is humanity."

**Kim Lamb Gregory**, a communication specialist at Cal State Channel Islands, is a veteran print and broadcast journalist.



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