

Marrone's entrepreneurial spirit pulls her away from AgraQuest

By Beth Curda
Enterprise staff writer

Pam Marrone has left her position at AgraQuest Inc. and will do again what she did 11 years ago: start a nonchemical agricultural pesticide company at a small lab in Davis.

Marrone will stay on the board at AgraQuest, the successful organic pesticide producer she founded in 1995, and will continue as an adviser. As of March 31, however, she no longer is AgraQuest's president.

Instead, she has been writing a business plan and preparing to say goodbye to the company that began with the discovery of a microbe in a peach orchard and since has put household and agricultural pest-control products on the shelves at retail giant Wal-Mart and made a name for itself among organic farmers.

"It's like leaving a child," Marrone, 49, said. "It's that emotional."

But, she said, it's like leaving a child who is 18 years old — still with some needs here and there, but, all in all, an adult.

AgraQuest is running on its own now and Marrone said her entrepreneurial spirit was too powerful for her to pass up an opportunity to start a new company.

The new business will not compete with AgraQuest. Rather, it will find a niche of its own. Marrone wants to expand the products that organic farmers have available to them.

Sucking insects called stinkbugs and plant bugs are problems. Weed control is practically archaic because organic farmers must use difficult traditional methods rather than products. Marrone also hopes to target fungi and worms that destroy plants' roots.



MARRONE
Writing a business plan for new venture

Winters farmer Craig McNamara said organic growers use mowers, traditional hand-held hoes, weed eaters and a process called flaming to control weeds, but many of those processes destroy only the parts of the plants above ground. He would like a nonchemical product that kills the roots.

When flaming weeds, he pulls a propane tank with an extended arm — "a sophisticated barbecue starter," he said — through the rows of walnut trees on his 450 acres of orchard and row crops. A constant flame is on the plants just long enough to burst their cellular structure.

He also uses a hoe to dig out weeds around the base of the trees so they do not compete with the trees for nutrients and water.

"Basically, everything is work," he said.

This time around, Marrone expects developing her business to be much easier.

Despite its hummingbird logo, AgraQuest did not get off the ground as smoothly as she would have liked. The federal approval of her products took twice as long as she expected, something that will not happen again, thanks to a law written by an organization she created. Getting the company to where it is today also took much more money than she expected.

This time, she has experience and organic farming is much more mainstream than it was 11 years ago.

"When I first started AgraQuest, the concept was really cutting-edge," she

said. Organic food sales were less than a \$1 billion per year, and today they bring in \$13 billion each year.

Eleven years ago, there wasn't much global food movement. Today, food is shipped all over the place and differences in countries' rules about chemicals on the produce has led to more emphasis on avoiding chemicals at the end of the growing process, if not all the time.

Her next steps are to finish the business plan, bring in a team of others to start the business with her, put together a board and find funding.

She admits her timeline for Marrone Organic Innovations — a name others have said she should use, but one that, showing her humble side, she cringes at a little — may be a little ambitious. Even so, she hopes to have the company up and running in six months.

Like AgraQuest, the new company will return to the beginning of the development process and look for microbes or team up with organizations that are working on products but have no one to develop and market them.

She is most excited about the opportunity to solve problems in the marketplace, she said.

"If I could find a significant product for weed control, then maybe I could retire," Marrone said with a laugh.

Said McNamara: "Pam has done a fabulous job of meeting the needs of today's farmers, and I think she's going to meet the needs of tomorrow's and future generations as well."

"It's been a long haul," Marrone said of AgraQuest. "A lot of hard work. A lot of hard work. So, seeing it take off was really heartwarming."

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