

CALIFORNIA

A Times investigation finds fraud and theft are rife at California's county fairs



Dusk settles over the Humboldt County Fair in Ferndale. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



By **Jessica Garrison**
Staff Writer | Follow

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- One-third of the state's 77 local fairs have been plagued by an array of problems, an L.A. Times investigation has found.
- Workers from at least four fairs have been prosecuted in the last few years for theft and bribery, with more than \$1 million in public funds stolen.
- State and county leaders overseeing these fairs have often failed to step in — even when problems are glaring or have been denounced by auditors or judges.

FERNDALE, Calif. — Like many of California's fairs, the one in Humboldt County is a cherished local institution, beloved for its junk food, adorable baby animals and exhibits of local arts and crafts. Rock star chef Guy Fieri, who grew up in town, even turns up to host the chili cook-off.

But along with its Ferris wheels and funnel cakes, the Humboldt County event shares something darker in common with a number of California's 77 local fairs: It has been racked with fraud and mismanagement.

The fair's former bookkeeper is due in federal court early next year after pleading guilty to [stealing \\$430,000](#) from the fair, according to documents filed in federal court. Police had arrested her after catching up with her at a local casino.

Humboldt is hardly an outlier. A Los Angeles Times investigation has found that [one-third of the state's 77 fairs](#) — hallowed celebrations of the state's agrarian tradition — have been plagued by an array of problems. Workers from at least four fairs have been prosecuted in the last few years for theft, bribery or embezzlement, with more

than \$1 million stolen, according to a Times review of criminal court filings. State auditors have accused officials at dozens of other fairs of misspending millions more, according to a Times review. Ventura suffered a cash heist, Santa Clara a kickback scheme, and across much of California, public funds have been spent in violation of [state rules](#), including on prime rib steaks and fancy wines while once-proud fairgrounds crumble into disrepair.

Drawing on thousands of pages of court filings, audits and public records from more than three dozen counties, along with scores of interviews, The Times identified at least 25 fairs where prosecutors, state auditors or government officials have accused employees in the last decade of misusing taxpayer money, pressuring businesses for bribes or treating public resources as their own. At still more fairs, officials have been called out in government reports or lawsuits for glaring failures of good governance.



A great horned owl performs for visitors during the raptor show at the Humboldt County Fair in Ferndale. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Collectively, the fairs bring in more than \$400 million a year in revenue, and many fairgoers see them as priceless cultural events honoring California’s agricultural heritage and their local communities.

But despite their crucial role, The Times found that the state and county leaders overseeing these fairs have often failed to step in — even when problems are glaring or have been denounced by auditors or judges. The state department of Food and Agriculture oversees 52 of the local fairs through district agricultural associations. An additional 22, plus the state fair and two citrus fairs, are in the state’s “network of fairs,” meaning they receive some state funding but are overseen by local governments and nonprofits.

Problems at 26 county fairs

At least 26 fairs around the state have been accused () of abusing public funds, management failures, theft or embezzlement, according to a Times review. In some cases fair employees have been prosecuted and convicted (). *Tap or click on a location for more details.*



Federal and state court documents, audits from the California State Auditor and the California Department of Food and Agriculture, and grand jury reports

Graphics reporting by Jessica Garrison. Map by Lorena Iñiguez Elebee and Sean Greene LOS ANGELES TIMES

“There needs to be more accountability,” said John Moot, a San Diego lawyer who represented a carnival company that has sued both the San Diego and Orange County fairs — both of which are overseen by the state.

Last year that carnival company, Talley Amusements, [was paid \\$500,000 by the San Diego County Fair to settle a lawsuit](#) that alleged fair officials had engaged in bid-

rigging when they went to hand out a multimillion-dollar contract to run rides and games on the midway. A San Diego County judge wrote that the evidence he reviewed “supports an inference of ‘favoritism,’ [fraud](#)’ and ‘corruption’ as to the award of public contracts, although no such definitive findings are made herein.”

Local newspapers [called on the state to do something](#). When asked about the case, California officials said only that they continue “to review the circumstances of this case to determine whether further guidance or compliance measures are warranted.”

State officials also took a tolerant stance toward problems that the California state auditor uncovered. In 2019, [an audit found](#) that top officials at the Kern County Fair and in the state had allowed “gross mismanagement to continue unchecked for years.” The audit revealed as well that the Kern district agricultural association’s board of directors, appointed by the governor, had feasted on lobster dinners and fine wines paid by fair funds but failed to provide effective oversight. Kern fair officials did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

County leaders and local nonprofits have not always been better stewards. Some have failed to notice or take action as fair officials stole money or allowed fairgrounds to fall into debt or disrepair — even when grand juries warned there were problems.

“Not surprised,” said David McCuan, a professor of political science at Sonoma State University who is well-versed in local fairs. “There are generations of farmers and generations of networks of neighbors, friends and family members [who run these fairs]. They help each other. How business is done is insular. It’s not open or transparent.” At the same time, he said, “fairs are big money.” Put all those things together, he said, and the conditions are ripe for mismanagement and corruption.



CALIFORNIA

From San Diego to Del Norte, a tally of recent scandals plaguing local fairs

Dec. 11, 2025

Although many county fairs operate without incident, scandals sometimes erupt from the most mundane of matters.

Last year, Shasta County agreed to [pay \\$300,000](#) to settle a lawsuit brought by a 9-year-old girl and her family after sheriff's deputies seized her goat. The girl had raised the goat, a floppy eared brown and white guy known as Cedar, as part of the fair's agricultural program, then changed her mind about watching a beloved animal turn into meat. But fair officials refused to allow her to back out; instead the county dispatched deputies across Northern California in pursuit of the animal, which was eventually butchered.

In a statement, a spokesperson for Gov. Gavin Newsom said “the state recognizes the challenges facing some of California’s fairgrounds and takes concerns about governance and accountability very seriously.”

In a separate statement, the California Department of Food and Agriculture said that “the difficulties uncovered at some fairs” should not overshadow their larger contributions. “These institutions serve as vital community hubs that play a key role in emergency response, as they support local economies.”

Fairgrounds are becoming increasingly important in the state’s disaster planning. During many of California’s recent wildfires, local fairgrounds have served as staging areas for firefighters and other emergency responders. Displaced animals find refuge there. They’ve also served as crucial evacuation centers — about [600 people](#), for example, lived at the Butte County fairgrounds in Chico for months after the 2018 Camp fire. Fairgrounds have become so essential to disaster response that the state has recently awarded [tens of millions of dollars](#) to upgrade facilities such as showers and kitchens that could be used for evacuees.

Yet in many counties, fairgrounds are in a state of disrepair. The Times identified more than a dozen that are plagued by leaky roofs, corroded and unsafe electrical systems, faulty plumbing, dangerously dilapidated grandstands and other unsafe conditions. This is partly because of mismanagement, but also because state funding

for fairs has declined in recent years. Fair finances have also been hard hit by the declining popularity of horse racing.

“I think back to how full the fair used to be,” said Jeannie Fulton, gesturing to Humboldt’s half-empty fairgrounds during the August celebration.

“County fairs are still really valuable, but they are mismanaged in a lot of ways. We all see the grounds just deteriorating,” added Fulton, who runs the Humboldt County Farm Bureau. “They need to be run better.”

Mindy Romero, director of USC’s Center for Inclusive Democracy, said fair management may not be the most pressing issue facing state leaders but “there should be some accountability ... these people are in charge of large amounts of money, and public trust and public resources.”



A judge, left, tries to decide which Boer goat has the best qualities and features during the Boer goat competition with 4-H club members, right, at the Humboldt County Fair. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

County fairs are “supposed to be a place where everybody can come together, family and friends and you bring the kids ... it’s these rituals and communities that we really need to take care of. If a community hears that their local fair is stealing it can make [people] even more distrustful of government,” she said.

‘Capricious abuse of power’

California’s first fair was [held in 1854](#), in what is now downtown San Francisco. It was so popular that the idea quickly spread, to Humboldt County in 1861, to San Diego in 1880 and to Orange County in 1890. (Los Angeles didn’t get in on the tradition until 1922.)

In 1887, the state Legislature, anxious to harness and regulate the explosion of fairs, created district agricultural associations, mini state agencies that manage the fairgrounds in each county and are run by boards appointed by the governor.

California is a dramatically different place than it was in 1887, but the governance structure of fairs largely remains. The 52 district agricultural associations each put on a fair, guided by boards appointed by the governor.

The 25 other fairs in the state’s network of fairs follow a similar program. The goal is for fairs to pay for themselves through admission prices, contracts with vendors and other sources of revenue, but they also receive state funding. District agricultural associations get about \$2.6 million a year from the state’s general fund; an additional \$5 million from sales tax revenue at the fairs is handed out each year to all 77 fairs in the network.

Each of the fairs strives to reflect its particular community. In Nevada County, the rides and food vendors set up beneath towering pine trees, and a central attraction this year was a model-train exhibit showcasing the historic derailment of circus cars. The Los Angeles County Fair, one of the state’s biggest, is known for its preposterous combination of junk food: deep-fried Oreos and pickles; corn wrapped in Cheetos; chicken sandwiches with funnel cake buns. The Calaveras County Fair features a frog-jumping contest, a nod to Mark Twain’s famous short story.

In small rural counties, said Jeff Griffiths, an Inyo County supervisor who is president of the California State Assn. of Counties, the fairgrounds serve as a “social and cultural hub” for the community all year.

“They are our event space,” he said. “We don’t have SoFi Stadium. Concerts, car shows, dances, on and on, they all happen at the fairgrounds.”

Lavish expenditures have for decades been part of the mix. A [1986 state audit](#) blasted the entire fair system, detailing state funds spent on parties, meals and expensive custom belt buckles, along with other misuses of state funds. These include improper contracting — a problem that continues to plague many fairs.

Five years ago, Ventura Flores was pleased when the Santa Clara County Fairgrounds hired his firm — 4 Diamond Security — to provide security as public health officials ramped up a massive COVID-19 testing and eventually vaccination operation at the fairgrounds. It was the middle of the pandemic, and 4 Diamond had little other work.



A performer with Animal Cracker Conspiracy high-fives Ryder Lang, 7, next to his friend Abigail Fielding, 6, both from San José, after entering the Santa Clara County Fair in San José. (Nhat V. Meyer / Bay Area News Group)

When he got the job, however, the fair's event's director, Obdulia Banuelos-Esparza, informed Flores that he would have to slip her cash in secret if he wanted to keep his contract, [according to a statement of probable cause](#) produced by the Santa Clara County District Attorney's office.

After he refused, Flores said, Banuelos-Esparza began to complain about the work his guards were doing, accusing them of shirking their duties and sleeping on the job. Flores said he doubted the accusations but also feared he would lose the job if he didn't pay, according to the statement of probable cause.

Flores, who did not respond to emails and calls from The Times, told investigators that he began giving Banuelos-Esparza between \$2,500 and \$4,000 a month, continuing for more than a year until sometime in the fall of 2021, when he said he stopped paying her. Then fair officials, who had told him they would be renewing 4 Diamond's contract for another six months, instead terminated it, according to the statement of probable cause.

The Santa Clara County district attorney began investigating the scheme in 2023, following a whistleblower complaint. In 2024, after reviewing Banuelos' bank records, the district attorney charged her with extortion and bribery, issuing a statement that the fairgrounds should be "where our community goes for fairs, festivals, and fun. Not felonies."

Banuelos pleaded no contest to commercial bribery this summer, [according to a news release from the Santa Clara County district attorney](#), and will [pay restitution](#) and serve felony probation, but avoided jail time. Reached by phone, she declined to comment.

There had long been warning signs: A 2019 Santa Clara County [grand jury report](#) uncovered "financial reports lacking in accuracy and transparency, violations of local bingo regulations, questionable tax reporting practices" and other problems. The grand jury also called out "a relaxed level of scrutiny and oversight" by the county.

After Banuelos' conviction, the district attorney released another statement, declaring the midway now "free of corruption."

"Ride the Ferris wheel, see the farm animals, eat the food and have fun knowing our fair is safe," he said.

Santa Clara's fair is not the only one that has strayed from accepted contracting rules. State audits in recent years have called out more than a dozen fairs, including those in [Santa Barbara](#) and [Turlock](#), for violating state policies by handing out money without signed agreements or competitive bidding.

In Fresno, officials required some vendors doing business with the Big Fresno Fair to also make donations to a foundation associated with the fair, according to a 2022 state audit. The foundation then purchased more than \$21,000 in gift cards that it gifted to fair employees, along with more than \$68,000, [according to the audit](#).

In a statement, fair officials said that the fair and its board of directors "took the findings of the audit very seriously" and made corrective actions that satisfied the state. The statement added that the fair plays a vital role in the community: in addition to the fair itself, the fairgrounds host 250 events each year and are used during fires and other emergencies.

In San Diego, after Talley Amusements filed its 2022 lawsuit alleging bid-rigging, several fair officials testified in sworn depositions that Talley had actually won the bid, but that a top fair official had pressured them to change the scores to award the contract to a different company. One fair official also testified that she had shredded the original scoring documents.

Fair officials, however, admitted no wrongdoing, with a spokesperson in 2023 calling the allegations of bid-rigging "hogwash." In a counterclaim filed in San Diego Superior Court, the fair accused Talley of submitting "a sham bid" that might have compromised public safety. In a statement, fair officials said that they agreed to settle the suit only because it was cheaper to do so than litigating it in court.

An 'inside job' safe heist

Every year, local fairs in California handle millions of dollars in cash — sometimes without the most basic of safeguards.

In the summer of 2022, a man working at the Ventura County Fair gave some accomplices a hot tip: A safe in the fair's office was packed with more than half a million dollars in cash.

On the night of Aug. 10, Alexander Piceno, 30, who worked for a company processing cash for the fair, left the front door to the state's 31st District Agricultural Assn. unlocked. He also left instructions on how to open the office safe, according to prosecutors. Two burglars walked in, loaded up \$572,000 in paper bills (which weighed upward of 50 pounds), and jumped in a car headed back to Los Angeles.



Alexander Piceno, who worked at the Ventura County Fair, was arrested and charged and pleaded guilty — along with three burglars — to stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars. (Ventura County District Attorney's office)

Police quickly realized they were dealing with an inside job, and four conspirators including Piceno were later arrested and charged, and pleaded guilty to felonies, [according to the district attorney](#). Most of the money, however, was never recovered; prosecutors said they seized \$6,100 and a used pickup truck purchased with proceeds from the crime.

The Times, reviewing state audits, grand jury reports, lawsuits and criminal filings, found allegations of theft or inappropriate use of public resources at more than a dozen fairs, including those in [San Joaquin](#), [Monterey](#), [Yolo](#), Inyo, Fresno and Tulare counties.

In Orange County, according to a 2018 state audit, officials at the 32nd District Agricultural Assn. [caught an employee embezzling more than \\$9,000](#) in ticket sales but failed to report the crime to the state as required. The audit also [noted that fair officials had spent more than \\$220,000](#) on catering without explaining a clear business purpose. In a statement, fair officials said that “issues cited” in the audit “have been addressed” and “new policies are in place regarding meals.” The statement added that all audits since have been “free of any issues.”

In several cases, including in Stanislaus County, public money [went for fancy meals](#) for the board members who are supposed to be watching over the fair’s operations. State audits sometime read like restaurant menus, with references to prime rib, salmon, ribeye steak and fine wine. It is one of many perks board members enjoy, which also often include free tickets for themselves and friends to concerts, dinners and the fair itself.



September 2022 photo of fairgoers on the opening day of the Tulare County Fair. (Ari Plachta / Sacramento Bee)

State auditors also found plenty of gifts to staff, including [bowling nights](#) and credit card charges (with and without required receipts) for flowers, gift cards and even clothes.

One employee at the Stanislaus fair spent thousands of dollars on clothes, which he told state auditors he bought for himself and members of the maintenance staff to wear during fair events. But the audit also found that other members of the maintenance staff members [“do not recall receiving these items.”](#)

‘The fair got off scot-free’



September 2017 photo of turkeys competing in a race during the annual Kern County Fair in Bakersfield. (Mark Ralston / AFP / Getty Images)

In Kern County, the state’s 15th Agricultural Assn. has put on a fair every year since 1916, except for two years during the Great Depression and in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Held in Bakersfield, in the heart of California’s farm belt, the fair has an operating budget of about \$10 million and welcomes around 350,000 people each year, according to officials.

To pull it off, the fair has a permanent staff of about 20, and hires about 500 temporary employees during the season. But investigators from the state auditor’s office found that some of these workers appeared far from wholly committed to their fair duties.

In [a 2019 audit](#), investigators found that several employees maintained second jobs — which they performed not in their spare time, but while clocked into their posts at the fair. “Several witnesses told us that Employee A and the other employees left work for

almost the entire day nearly every day for weeks or even months at a time,” the audit said.

The fair’s board of directors and chief executive had their own issues, auditors found, among them a taste for expensive dinners and bottles of fine Cabernet, paid for with fair credit cards despite rules against it. In addition, auditors found that at least one of the dinners, which included six board members gabbing together across a table, may have violated the state’s open meeting law that forbids a quorum of a governing body without public notice. Over a three-year period, the audit found, the Kern County fair [“spent \\$132,584 on credit card purchases for which \[it\] had no supporting receipts.”](#)

Auditors reserved some of their harshest criticisms for the lack of oversight by state officials that they said had allowed all of these “improper governmental activities.”

The audit reported that the department’s Fairs and Expositions branch did not conduct a single compliance audit of the more than 50 fairs under its purview from 2011 to 2017.

The audit generated a series of [outraged headlines](#) in newspapers around the state, many of them focused on the fine food and wine that board members and the CEO, Michael Olcott, had feasted upon. Olcott did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The audit’s release did not bring about many substantive changes in the leadership at the Kern County Fair. Six years later, the CEO remains in his post, as do most of the board members who oversaw the fair back then. In a statement, state officials said they “worked with the fair’s leadership to implement corrective measures, including stronger financial controls, enhanced segregation of duties, and updated board and staff training on state contracting and accounting policies.” Officials also said they continue to “monitor the fair’s progress through periodic reviews and ongoing technical assistance.”

After the audit, the Kern County district attorney [opened a case](#) against the fair's maintenance supervisor, accusing him of recycling scrap metal from the fair and pocketing the proceeds. The case is set to go to trial next year. The maintenance supervisor, Joe Hebert, maintains his innocence. He said that he is being scapegoated.

“Recycling scrap metal was part of my job and I had permission to do it,” Hebert said. “I could walk away and plead to a misdemeanor and I’m not going to do it,” he said.

Mark Salvaggio, a former Bakersfield City Council member who served on the Kern County fair board for several years ending in 2014, said he was outraged at the outcome of the audit. “The fair got off scot-free,” he said.

After the state auditor released its Kern County report, the California Department of Food and Agriculture threw its own auditing team into high gear. The division has released more than 15 audits since 2020 — after years of doing few or none.

A series of blistering reports have been issued, followed in some cases by radical changes in personnel.

In a statement, officials said they are “committed to ensuring transparency and accountability at California’s fairs.” Officials noted that audits check for compliance with state policies, and that the oversight program has been reestablished after being “drastically reduced” because of funding cuts during the Great Recession.

But some local officials say the audits, although they may be exposing examples of misspending, sometimes unfairly tarnish fair officials who often struggle to run vital community events with little training in government accounting and contracting rules.

“This is a very unique business that isn’t found anywhere else in state government,” said Corey Oakley, the CEO of the Napa Valley Expo. “We have live animals, corn dogs, flowers, drag queens, horse racing, tractors, destruction Derby ...”

Griffiths of the California Assn. of Counties said he thinks the state should either fully fund fairs and “make them viable, or they should turn them over to local communities so we can run them.”

“They have to follow state requirements, but there is none of the benefit of state funding that comes with that,” he said. Meanwhile, he added, “the deferred maintenance on these things is outrageous. They’re falling apart.”

‘I pray we can keep this alive’



Bella Gantt uses her feet as she performs her blindfolded archery show for visitors at the Humboldt County Fair in Ferndale. Gantt is the only person in the world who performs a blindfolded archery show using her feet. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

In Humboldt, where the fair is in the state’s network of fairs but not directly overseen by the state, Fair Board President Andy Titus said he is desperate to make sure his local fair survives. His is the oldest continuously operating festival in the state but is reeling from the double blow of embezzlement and the loss of horse racing. The

fairgrounds are also in tough shape; in 2023 the fair had to perform emergency repairs to make its grandstands safe enough for people to sit in them.

“I’ve loved this fair since I was a little kid,” said Titus, a local dairy farmer who said he grew up showing animals at the fair and now helps his children do the same. “I pray we can keep this alive.”

The fairgrounds sprawl across a flat coastal plain near the Victorian-era town of Ferndale. A few miles away, the cliffs of California’s Lost Coast rise up and white-capped waves pound into miles of empty beach. In a county with more trees than people, many residents say their yearly visits to the fair help them gather as a community in a part of California known for its isolation.

But the beloved fair has not been well-run for some time, according to federal district court records in San Francisco. At the beginning of 2021, [it was in “total chaos,”](#) as one manager would describe to an FBI agent.

The organization was 15 years behind on auditing its books, and the state was [threatening to cut off its funding.](#)

The fair also lacked a bookkeeper, a secretary and other assistance. Even the office itself was in disarray, with “approximately a year worth of backlogged mail and files on the floor,” an interim manager would later tell the FBI, [according to an agent’s report of his interview with her](#) filed in federal court.

The manager turned to Craigslist for a bookkeeper who could help make sense of the disorder, and found Nina Tafarella.



Nina Tafarella stole more than \$430,000 from the Humboldt County Fair, according to a federal criminal complaint, and has pleaded guilty to embezzlement charges. (Humboldt County Sheriff)

At this point in her life, Tafarella was recovering from an addiction to prescription painkillers, was drinking heavily and was in a state of stress and occasional seeming mania, [according to a sentencing memo her attorney](#) filed in federal court. She was also deep in the grips of a [compulsive gambling problem](#), which got so bad that she started lying to her friends about how much time she was spending at casinos.

But she was cheerful and helpful and she was charging only about \$35 to \$40 an hour for her time, far less than a certified public accountant might have cost the fair. She was hired.

Fair officials [did not check her references](#). If they had done a thorough background check, they might have learned that Tafarella had been accused of embezzling money from two previous businesses in Southern California where she worked as a bookkeeper. She had been fired, [according to an account her own attorney filed in federal court](#), but the police and local district attorney had declined to file charges.

Tafarella was a friendly face in the office, bringing in coffee some days. But she also had some quirks: Her co-workers noticed that she did not reliably show up for work and she was [“frequently observed at the casino” up the road from the fair office](#), [according to an account her lawyer filed in federal court](#).

She was also using the fair’s financial software for her own gain. She created fake employee names — [very similar to actual employees but often with the addition of the middle initial “J”](#) — and began cutting huge checks to these fictional people, with the funds going right into accounts she controlled.

It all came crashing down at a nearby dance studio. Tafarella had also worked there and had stolen a little more than \$20,000. But unlike the fair, the owner of the studio noticed and filed a police report.

After learning of that on Nov. 8, 2022, the fair called in an outside financial expert, who took a quick look at the books and discovered the ghost payroll scheme. Fair officials shut down Tafarella’s access to their bank accounts and by Nov. 15, when Tafarella was next due at work, an FBI agent was at the fair offices.

She did not show up. A short time later, a fair board member went up to the local Bear River Casino and found Tafarella at the gaming tables, [according to a report from an FBI agent filed in federal court](#).

She was arrested and later pleaded guilty to five counts of wire fraud.

“Everybody was shocked,” Titus said. “She was always very friendly when you saw her.”

In filings to the judge overseeing her sentencing, Tafarella said she has now stopped drinking and gambling and that it “makes me sick” to think about what she has done. Still, in asking for a reduced sentence, her lawyer also argued that if the fair had been better run, it might have been able to protect itself from Tafarella’s schemes.

“Remarkably, the fair association’s own witnesses admitted that the Board was not financially savvy and had little to no idea about the state of the fair’s finances,” [Tafarella’s lawyer wrote](#). Instead, “they solely entrusted Ms. Tafarella, who was suffering from visibly anxious, drinking too much, acting erratically, and reliably to be found at the casino, with the fair association’s finances.”

Titus, whose job at the fair is volunteer, said he has been working almost around the clock ever since to try to save the operation, which saw smaller crowds this year, partly because the lack of horse racing.

“It’s sad,” said Robin Eckerfield, a 72-year-old educator from Fortuna, who said she goes to the fair every year to sample the food, look at the crafts and catch up with old friends. She couldn’t help but notice the reduced offerings this year, a result of the fair’s dire circumstances.

The crowds were small enough that even on the day of the famous chili cook-off, celebrity chef Fieri could walk through the fair mostly unmobbed.

Fieri, who said he got his start as a chef with a pretzel cart at the fairgrounds as a kid, said he returns whenever he can to support it.

While handing out the trophies, Fieri delivered an impassioned speech to the paltry but enthusiastic crowd about the importance of supporting the annual event.

“We all love the fair,” he told the small crowd. “This is our fair. We have to keep it going. We have to keep it alive.”

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Jessica Garrison

Jessica Garrison writes about Northern California for the Los Angeles Times. She has previously covered Los Angeles City Hall, courts, education and the environment. As a reporter, her work has won a National Magazine Award for Public Service, among other honors. Work she has edited has won a George Polk Award and was a finalist for a Goldsmith Prize. Her book, “The Devil’s Harvest,” told the story of a contract