

# Central Coast Farm & Ranch

SPRING 2024

A photograph showing five agricultural workers in white protective suits and hoods walking through a field of young plants. The workers are positioned in the middle ground, moving from left to right. The field is covered with rows of small, green plants, likely citrus seedlings, spaced out on a light-colored soil or mulch. In the background, there are several tall, dark trees and a clear blue sky. The overall scene suggests a controlled agricultural environment, possibly a nursery or a field being prepared for a specific crop.

## Suiting Up For Fruit Fly Battle

+ LIMONEIRA FOR SALE. WHAT'S NEXT?



# The Agromen

*How three Rio Mesa High School buddies built Agromin, the largest organics recycler in the state with the agricultural sector as its biggest customer*

BY KIM LAMB GREGORY

Long before brothers Richard and Rodney Helland and their friend Bill Camarillo were running Ventura County's composting giant Agromin, the three Rio Mesa High School alumni ran a tree trimming business out of El Rio.

Today, Agromin is the largest organics waste company in California with the agricultural sector as its biggest customer.

California's efforts to recycle and fight climate change have been the wind at Agromin's back as it continued to evolve, developing a win-win formula for farmers and ranchers by selling blended and recycled organic plant material that cities and counties must recycle by law.

"If the city can't use it in parks, street mediums, golf courses and the like, Agromin can broker that mandated tonnage back to our agricultural partners so we reduce their crop input costs and lower the costs of the production of our food," said Chief Operating Officer Dave Green, 63, a 25-year veteran of Oxnard-based Agromin.

Each year, the facility processes a million tons of residential and commercial yard waste, and a recent \$10 million grant from CalRecycle will help Agromin build a \$30 million commercial-scale food waste compost facility at

Limoneira in Santa Paula. The new plant will help Ventura County comply with Senate Bill 1389, a 2016 bill requiring 75 percent of all organic waste from each county to be diverted or turned into compost by the year 2025.

"I tell everybody we're a 30-year overnight success," Camarillo, 60, said with a grin.

## **Started as tree trimmers**

Richard was 17, and a 1975 graduate of Rio Mesa High when he took over Tri-Counties Tree Service from his dad, who was injured on the job. He was soon joined by younger brother Rodney, who graduated in 1981 with Camarillo.

It took another decade for Camarillo to join the company, reuniting with his classmates when all three played on the same softball team. Camarillo had just finished a 10-year stint in the U.S. Marines.



From left, Bill Camarillo and brothers Richard and Rodney Helland played on each other's strengths to build Agromin, the state's largest organics recycler. The Oxnard yard creates 300 types of soils, mulches and amendments.

CREDIT: DAVID NEWMAN

"He was smart," Rodney said. "He was just out of the military and he knew how to get things done."

At the time the trio were grinding tree waste and sending it to plants to create energy. But Camarillo sensed an opportunity with the state's increased efforts toward fighting climate change. "I could see the writing on the wall," he said.

The California legislature proved him right in 2000 when it mandated that cities divert 50 percent of their recyclable material out of landfills. The company was well-positioned to do so as it had purchased an existing soil blend manufacturing company called Agromin in 1993 and merged it with their tree-grinding business.

The new Agromin then transformed into an organics waste company and brought Green on board from Southern California Edison, as Green was familiar with the rules and regulations of meeting state standards. *Continued on page 18*



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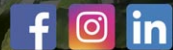
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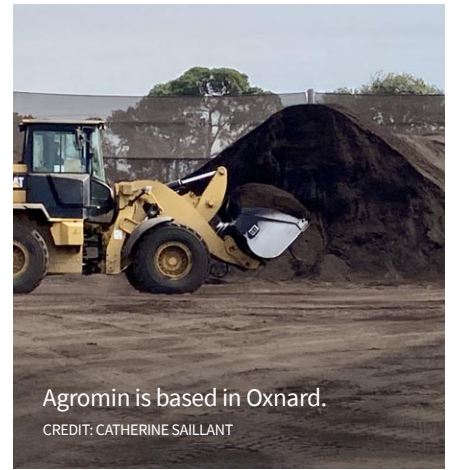
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Agromin is based in Oxnard.  
CREDIT: CATHERINE SAILLANT

**Agromin**  
*Continued from page 17*

“It was a new space with really no road map, so it was exciting,” Green said. “And the challenge of really pioneering an industry as there was really no green waste or composting or organics industry at the time.”

Business was brisk as more and more cities hired Agromin to recycle their yard waste. But how to sell what they were blending into premium soils and mulches? Camarillo looked to California’s thriving agricultural industry.

*“It was a new space with no road map, so it was exciting.”*

**Dave Green**, Agromin  
chief operating officer

He demonstrated to growers how application of soil amendments and mulches would cut down on water use and help reduce the need for pesticides and herbicides. And some of its products are certified organic under the USDA National Organic Program, filling a niche for growers in the expanding certified organics market.

“I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to sell to agriculture markets, which today makes up the lion’s share of our business,” he said.

Today the company receives green waste from over 200 jurisdictions in 15 counties. Then, Agromin uses the com-

post as the staple ingredient to create over 300 different custom mixed mulch and soil “recipes” that go to farmers, ranchers, landscapers and homeowners.

Like Oprah.

“Oprah likes this walk-on bark because she puts it on her rose gardens,” Green said, as he pointed to a concrete-sided bin filled with fragrant reddish mulch designed to fight weeds.

Richard, 66, and Rodney, 60, like to be hands-on, fixing equipment, mixing compost, and making sure the daily operations run smoothly. Camarillo, 60, takes care of the networking and entrepreneurial vision.

“Billy’s very good for the business,” Richard said. “He likes talking to all the fancy people, and that’s not my thing. He’s really good at it, too.”

The new plant at Limoneira will be a carbon-neutral facility that will allow Ventura County to be landfill-free for organic waste for the foreseeable future, Green said. Agromin recently added a Mountain View Food Waste Processing Facility in Oxnard, further growing the company.

Looking back, Camarillo believes that some of the reason for their success dates back to high school, and what they all learned there as athletes.

“We know you can’t win without a team,” Camarillo said. “We are a team of people who believe in what we do which makes us successful. You can do good and do well at the same time if you work hard enough.”

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



Dave Green points to gauge measuring temperature of compost heap.

CREDIT: CATHERINE SAILLANT

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