

Howdy pardner, welcome to the Fair!: State Fair kicks off 11-day expo today.

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Aug. 25--On the street below the new flags and decorations, vendors from near and far set up their booths, displayed their wares and stocked trailers in preparation for the 134th annual Colorado State Fair, which gets under way at 10 a.m. today. Across the Fairgrounds Thursday many of the age-old buildings wore fresh coats of yellow and green paint, symbolic of the 4-H and Future Farmers of America - the agriculture roots of Colorado's 11-day expo. At the Midway, workers erected carnival rides and launched test runs. Farm trucks hitched with long trailers maneuvered through the busy Fairgrounds streets to settle livestock into their new, temporary homes while showing at the Fair.

Scooting around the small, emerging city was Fair General Manager Chris Wiseman, a smile on his face and iced tea in hand while riding in a golf cart with his own name on it. Maybe now, he joked, no one will steal it. These are the "hectic" days of the Fair, he said.

Hectic could easily describe the storm of pressure and controversy surrounding the Fair's financial woes, which may finally pass in 2006.

Wiseman's smile could be because the eight-year, \$2.4 million debt owed to the state treasury and the remaining \$1.4 million worth of construction bonds for the Events Center will be paid off, thanks to the State Fair funding legislation enacted this year. Initially, the debt would be paid over the next three years. Sitting in his golf cart Wednesday, Wiseman said he expects "it will be paid in 32 months."

Wiseman's smile also could be for SMG Worldwide Entertainment, which will be in charge of promoting and boosting business at the Events Center. SMG and the Fair have signed a two-year contract. "It's been quite a year," Wiseman said. "We had a lot of turning points this year." He praised state legislators and a "strong" State Fair Board Authority for the funding bill. He said that hiring SMG will add "additional business I don't have at this point." But, things have not been all roses: In June, rock group Shinedown canceled its State Fair appearance to open for Godsmack and Rob Zombie's tour, which also begins today. In July, a serious illness forced longtime Fair favorite Freddy Fender to cancel his Fiesta Day show. The Fair hustled to find

Little Joe and Caravanserai to fill the act. On Aug. 1, Seether also canceled its scheduled Fair appearance, originally set for Saturday, leaving Trapt, which was signed in June to replace Shinedown, to take center stage at the Events Center. Two days later, the Fair announced that it would change carnival providers this year. Crabtree Amusements replaced longtime regular Bill Hames. Wiseman said Bill Hames was struggling to muster enough rides for the Fair. An investigation into the death of a 9-year-old girl on one of Crabtree's rides last year showed that Crabtree was not at fault, according to officials. On Aug. 4, entertainer Howie Mandel's concert was moved back a day so he could appear on the Emmy Awards. He'll perform at the Events Center on Monday.

"After a while," Wiseman said, "it's just like 'OK, let's find someone else.' But you can't worry about things you have no control over. And you have to try not to lose too much hair over it." The Fair's boss now for two years, Wiseman is elated with the expo's new look and decorations, new attractions and carnival. The weather - something that worries Wiseman but of which he has no control over - is the last obstacle. "All we need is 11 days of no rain," he said. "But the forecast calls for scattered showers (today)." -----

Today's Fair schedule Schedule is subject to change. Updated daily schedules are available at any of the Fair's entrance gates.

8 a.m. - English 4-H Horse Show, Horse Show Arena 9 a.m. - Market Goat Show, Livestock Pavilion 10 a.m. - State Fair Board of Commissioner's meeting Weigh-in Market Lambs, Livestock Pavilion

Judge Homebrew, Special Events Tent Millie's Sewing Center demonstrations 10:30 a.m. - Great American Duck Races, Triangle Park 11 a.m. - Barn Tours, Sheep and Swine Barn, every 30 minutes until 7 p.m. Noon - Commissioner of Agriculture, Don Ament Luncheon, Cinch Free Stage Great American Duck Races, Triangle Park Kids! WB Mobile Tour, Behind the Palace of Agriculture Receive Open and Junior Field Crops and Hay, Small Animal Building 12:30 p.m. - Welde Bear Show, Fountain Park 1 p.m. - Market Beef Show, Showmanship to follow, Livestock Pavilion Paul Bunyan Lumberjack show, Triangle Park Judge Open and Junior Field Crops and Hay, Small Animal Building

King/Queen of the Kitchen awards ceremony, Creative Arts Kitchens

Prince/Princess of the Kitchen awards Ceremony, Creative Arts Kitchen

Trujillo's Steam King Dance Heads, next to Palace of Agriculture

1:30 p.m. - Mermaids and Mariners, Fountain Park 2 p.m. - Great American Duck Races, Triangle Park 2:30 p.m. - Budweiser Clydesdales, Fountain Park 3 p.m. - Paul Bunyan Lumberjack Show, Triangle Park

College Invest Toddler Driving School, Triangle Park until 7 p.m.

3:30 p.m. - Mermaids and Mariners, Fountain Park 4 p.m. - Great American Duck Races, Triangle Park Centennial Farms awards, Pepsi Stage 4:30 p.m. - Welde Bear Show, Fountain Park 5 p.m. - Centennial Farms Receptions, Colorado Dept. of Agriculture Pavilion Legislative Barbecue (by invitation), Cinch Free Stage 5:30 p.m. - Mermaids and Mariners, Fountain Park 6 p.m. - The Great American Spam Championship, Creative Arts Building Kitchen Colorado Springs Utilities 4-H Barbecue, Horse Show Arena Great American Duck Races, Triangle Park Open & Junior Rabbit Point Show judging, Small Animal Building Tube Works, Comcast Amphitheatre 6:30 p.m. - Thomas Martinez, Cinch Free Stage Mutton Bustin', Sunshine Park 6:45 p.m. - PRCA Dodge Rodeo, Budweiser Rodeo Arena 7 p.m. - Grand Champion Market Goat Selection, Livestock Pavilion Paul Bunyan Lumberjack Show, Triangle Park 7:30 p.m. - Welde Bear Show, Fountain Park 8 p.m. - Rick Springfield, Events Center Grand Champion Market Beef Selection, Livestock Pavilion 8:30 p.m. - Mermaids and Mariners, Fountain Park 9 p.m. - Fireworks, Budweiser Rodeo Arena 10 p.m. - Western Underground, Cinch Free Stage

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