

A Community of Good Stewards: Building a Sustainable Food System in Ventura County



Ventura County Ag Futures Alliance

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Ag Futures Alliance — A Different Approach

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Growers and others concerned about agriculture's survival formed a coalition named the Ag Futures Alliance (AFA) in late 1999 to address some of the more critical challenges facing farming in Ventura County. The initial purpose of AFA was to create a framework for actions to ensure that agriculture would remain a vibrant and vital element of the Ventura County landscape, culture and economy in perpetuity.

Recognizing a need for broad-based public commitment and participation, members of AFA agreed that Ventura County agriculture must make the environmental and health concerns of non-farming residents a top priority. The alliance invited representatives from a variety of social and environmental concerns to participate, and with few exceptions the offer was accepted.

It became clear to AFA participants that the first step must be to create meaningful two-way communication. The second step would be to build trust, and the third step would be to discover win-win solutions based on mutual respect and appreciation. It was during this third phase that AFA formed a subcommittee on stewardship, charging it with developing a set of principles and practices to guide farmers so they could conduct business without damaging the local environment.

Participants soon realized that if the principles and practices of stewardship were to be meaningful and effective, they had to be expanded to address the roles and obligations of other important components of the community, specifically consumers and policy makers. This document, the product of more than a year of work by the subcommittee and countless revisions by the entire AFA membership, reflects consensus by the members of the AFA roundtable on a new ethic of stewardship intended to guide interactions among everyone with a stake in local agriculture's future.

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Members of the Ag Futures Alliance believe the long-term sustainability of Ventura County agriculture depends on the willingness of all sectors of the community to behave in ways that reinforce the industry's viability and to avoid behaving in ways that will harm it. In this document, AFA proposes a set of principles and practices that the three major elements of the community — farmers, consumer, and policy makers — can employ to translate that goal into action.

Taken together, these practices and principles constitute an expansive ethic of stewardship, describing the obligations each sector of the community owes to the others. For farming to remain a healthy component of the local economy, culture and society, the industry is obliged to respect the ecological integrity of its resource base and to operate in harmony with the broader community. And just as farmers must act as good stewards of the land to remain viable, so are members of the community obliged to act as good stewards of the agricultural industry if they wish to enjoy the benefits it provides. These include local economic stability, the aesthetic values of a rich and diverse landscape, and a healthy and affordable food supply.

The core of this document is a list of practices for each of three major sectors of the local community. For farmers, the recommendations focus on steps that minimize the biological and social effects of production and marketing techniques. For consumers, the practices are designed to illuminate the effect of economic and political actions — from food purchases to land-use decisions at the ballot box — on local agriculture. For policy makers, the suggested practices address the effect of land-use laws, regulations and other policies on the economic viability of farming.

It is critical for all segments of the community to realize that stewardship is a two-way street: If agriculture fails to respond to its neighbors' concerns, farmers will become vulnerable to political decisions that undermine their ability to conduct business. If consumers undermine the economic foundation of local agriculture, either directly or through the actions of their elected representatives, they imperil a critical component of the local economy and hasten conversion of farms and open space to an urban landscape.

It is AFA's hope that this document will help everyone understand how their actions ripple throughout the social, economic and cultural fabric of the county, and will enable them to make choices and decisions that accurately reflect their values.

Introduction

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

— Aldo Leopold,
A Sand County Almanac

In his 1949 classic of conservation writing, pioneering ecologist Aldo Leopold called for the development of a “land ethic” that would redefine the relationship between human beings and their physical surroundings. Rather than regard the land as a resource to be exploited without regard for the future, he argued, human beings must bring the same ethical regard to their relationship with the land that they bring to their relationships with each other. He regarded this as necessary to prevent mismanagement and exhaustion of the resource base upon which humankind’s long-term survival depends.

“All ethics so far evolved,” he wrote, “rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for). The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land.”

In this document, the Ag Futures Alliance proposes a similarly expansive ethic of stewardship with respect to Ventura County agriculture. In keeping with the principles outlined in its constitution, AFA believes that the long-term sustainability of this industry depends on the willingness of all sectors of the community to behave in ways that reinforce the viability of agriculture and to avoid behaving in ways that will harm it.

Just as consumers have a right to expect that farmers will not damage their air and water or supply them with unhealthy food, so farmers have a right to expect that consumers will not act in ways that gratuitously undermine the legal, political and economic foundations of farming. Just as elected officials have a right to expect the farm industry to abide by local laws and regulations, farmers have a right to expect that regulators will not act without considering the effect of those actions on the long-term viability of agriculture.

There is another way to express this ethic of stewardship: not as a bill of rights, but as a bill of obligations. For farming to remain a healthy component of the local economy, culture and society, the industry is obliged to respect the ecological integrity of its resource base and to operate in harmony with the broader community. And just as farmers must act as good stewards of the land to remain viable, so are members of the community obliged to act as good stewards of the agricultural industry if they wish to enjoy the benefits it provides. These include local economic stability, the aesthetic values of a rich and diverse landscape, and a healthy and affordable food supply.

Principles of Stewardship

Subsequent sections of this document will describe in detail the practices each of the three key sectors of the Ventura County community — farmers, consumers, and policy makers — can adopt to help ensure the survival of local farming while protecting natural resources and the land base upon which agriculture depends. In general, however, the principles underlying these practices may be summarized as an echo of Leopold’s prescription: An action is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and economic health of farming and the local environment. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

These practices also reflect two of the guiding principles in the AFA constitution: We are accountable for the effect of our actions on other members of the community, and we must ensure that the actions we take today do not impede our ability to act the same way in the future.

For farmers, meeting this obligation means recognizing the biological and social effects of production and marketing techniques. For consumers, it means recognizing the effect of economic and political actions — from food purchases to land-use decisions at the ballot box — on local agriculture. For policy makers, it means recognizing the effect of land-use laws, regulations and other policies on the economic viability of farming.

It is critical for all segments of the community to realize that stewardship is a two-way street: If agriculture fails to respond to its neighbors’ concerns, farmers will become vulnerable to political decisions that undermine their ability to conduct business. If consumers undermine the economic foundation of local agriculture, either directly or through the actions of their elected representatives, they imperil a critical component of the local economy and hasten conversion of farms and open space to an urban landscape.

It is AFA’s hope that this document will help everyone understand how their actions ripple throughout the social, economic and cultural fabric of the county, and will enable them to make choices and decisions that accurately reflect their values.

Practices of Stewardship for Consumers

Consumers have tremendous power to influence the profitability, and therefore viability, of the agricultural industry. They wield this influence economically, through their expenditures in the marketplace, and politically, through the regulatory decisions they either make directly at the ballot box or indirectly by appealing to their elected representatives for action. When buying food, consumers who value local agriculture express that support by spending their money in ways that reinforce farming rather than undermine it. When acting in the political realm, they encourage policies and regulatory actions that address community concerns without imposing an unsupportable burden on farming. They oppose or avoid actions that erode agriculture's viability unless there is an overriding public concern that cannot be addressed in any other way.

In the marketplace, consumers can act as good stewards in the following ways:

- Urge retailers to provide accurate and complete information about the source of food products they sell.
- Urge retailers to stock locally grown farm products when they are available.
- If there's a choice between locally grown farm commodities and imported farm commodities, buy local.
- Buy directly from producers whenever possible, through such venues as farmers markets and on-farm retail operations, as this ensures a larger share of the food dollar goes to the farmer rather than to intermediaries.
- Buy food that's in season, as it is less likely to be imported from distant sources.
- Buy food as close to its raw form as possible; most of the money spent on heavily processed and packaged food products goes to the marketing and processing sectors rather than to the growers.
- When buying packaged or processed food, give preference to those products that have been prepared by the producers or by locally based grower cooperatives as a "value-added" enterprise, instead of those prepared by second or third parties. This ensures more of the food dollar stays on the farm.
- When buying packaged or processed food, give preference to those utilizing minimal packaging so as to decrease waste and reduce resource use.
- Buy food that has been produced using sustainable practices, which may include organic production techniques.
- Be willing to pay slightly more for locally grown farm products, whether produced conventionally or organically, in recognition of the added but hard-to-quantify value a vibrant agricultural industry contributes to the local quality of life.
- Learn about sustainability and how its principles can be applied at the personal and community levels.

In the political realm, consumers can act on the principles of stewardship in the following ways:

- Vote for political candidates who support urban growth strategies that maintain the integrity of farmland and direct development within existing urban boundaries.

- Learn to distinguish between the normal activities of farming, such as tilling, frost protection and safe chemical application, and those that are abnormal and worthy of concern, such as improper and non-permitted pesticide or herbicide applications.
- Support efforts to identify and change farming practices that violate legal or regulatory standards, or which threaten public health and safety.
- Support efforts to establish and finance a land conservancy dedicated to acquiring development rights and other financial strategies to maintain land in farming.
- Support efforts to remove legal impediments to the perpetuation of family farms, such as excessive estate taxes.
- Support efforts to provide safe and suitable farmworker housing.
- Evaluate proposed amendments to comprehensive plans and other actions by local elected bodies for their likely effect on agriculture. Support through direct action — either by public testimony or by submitting written comments — those proposals that would reinforce farming’s viability; oppose those that would undermine it.
- Support the formation and activities of community institutions that seek to build consensus among people of different viewpoints.

Practices of Stewardship for Farmers

Through its ability to affect the quality of the soil, air and water, agriculture influences the health of its own resource base as well as the quality of life enjoyed by all local residents. Long-term survival of the industry requires that farmers maintain or strengthen natural ecological processes, adopt sustainable production practices, and cultivate healthy economic and political relationships with the broader community.

In the environmental realm, farmers can act as good stewards in the following ways:

- Reduce or eliminate the use of materials that can harm the health of farmers, farmworkers, consumers or the environment, such as excess nutrients, pesticides and herbicides.
- Use beneficial insects and other techniques as part of an integrated pest management system.
- Match cropping patterns to the productive potential and physical limitations of the farm landscape.
- Maintain or restore natural ecological conditions along streams and other biologically important habitat areas.
- Promote healthy soil by sustaining the micro-organisms, organic matter and other natural constituents that contribute to its fertility and structure.
- Reduce runoff and erosion.
- Use renewable energy sources in place of non-renewable sources, and encourage efficiency in the use of non-renewables if their use is necessary.
- Maximize efficiency of water use, and ensure that consumption of water from local sources does not exceed the groundwater recharge rate or impair the functioning of ecosystems dependent on surface flows.

In the economic and social realms, farmers can act on the principles of good stewardship in the following ways:

- Develop and expand direct-to-consumer markets such as community-supported agriculture programs, on-farm retail operations and farmers' markets, in order to strengthen the relationship between growers and local residents.
- Strengthen relationships with consumers by providing labeling information about where and under what conditions products were grown
- Participate in educational programs intended to teach non-farmers about agriculture.
- Ensure equitable working conditions for farmworkers, including access to affordable health care and a fair wage.
- Ensure safe working conditions for farmworkers by providing training and appropriate equipment, and by adhering to all state and national labor laws.
- Support community efforts to provide affordable farmworker housing.

Practices of Stewardship for Policy Makers

Elected representatives who set public policy affect farming through their decisions regarding urban boundaries, development and transportation projects, zoning and other regulations. Ensuring the long-term viability of farming requires policy makers to evaluate the effect of any proposed action on the agricultural industry and to reject those proposals that would undermine it, unless there is an overriding public interest that cannot be served any other way.

Policy makers can act as good stewards in the following ways:

- Confine development within designated urban boundaries.
- Become educated about local, state and federal agricultural policies.
- Promote construction of farmworker housing.
- Provide financial support for local farmers markets, labeling programs and other efforts intended to forge stronger ties between farmers and consumers.
- Without compromising public health, safety or the environment, incorporate flexibility into permitting processes to account for the fluid and dynamic nature of the farming industry.
- Recognize that agricultural islands within cities may not be viable for farming over the long term, and develop a process to allow their development when that becomes the only economically sustainable option for the owner.
- Adopt policies giving permit priority to infill and high-density development instead of projects that consume raw land on the urban fringe.
- Establish, maintain and properly fund programs to educate the public about right-to-farm laws, legal farming practices and other issues pertinent to the rural-urban interface.
- Require developers of encroaching projects to dedicate property to create buffer zones between urban land uses and neighboring farms.
- Avoid prime farmland when siting schools, jails and other public facilities.
- Don't extend or expand transportation corridors across prime agricultural land.
- When modifying existing roads and highways in agricultural areas, incorporate equipment crossings and other features to minimize conflict between motorists and farm-related traffic.
- Establish, maintain and properly fund a staff position to monitor land-use decisions by the local agencies, and to provide information necessary for sound policy decisions by elected officials.
- Don't impose zoning and development standards that unnecessarily impede standard and legal farming practices.
- Establish a mechanism by which to involve farmers and agricultural landowners in the land-use planning process and to mediate ag-urban conflicts as they arise.

Conclusion

The Ag Futures Alliance was founded on the premise that conflicts between agriculture and its urban neighbors can best be resolved — or prevented — through honest and respectful dialogue among people with a wide range of views and interests. In keeping with that founding principle, AFA offers this document to the community as not just a set of ethical guidelines but as a basis for informed public discussion of Ventura County's future.

As this report makes clear, the obligations of good stewardship and agricultural sustainability belong to everyone. Farming cannot remain a healthy component of the local economy, culture and society unless the industry respects the ecological integrity of its resource base and operates in harmony with the broader community. Likewise, members of the community cannot continue to enjoy the benefits agriculture provides — including local economic stability, the aesthetic values of a rich and diverse landscape, and a healthy, affordable and local food supply — unless they act in ways that maintain agriculture's viability.

As members of AFA, we challenge our fellow community members to incorporate into their daily lives the ethical practices described in this document. We also encourage public participation in a continuing dialogue about the future of farming in Ventura County, and about the responsibility we all share for building that future.

Resources

Ag Futures Alliance

<http://www.agfuturesalliance.net/index.htm>

Agriculture Food & Human Values Society

<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/rhaynes/afhvs/>

California Institute for Rural Studies

<http://www.cirsinc.org/>

California Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

<http://www.calsawg.org/>

Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems

<http://zzyx.ucsc.edu/casfs/>

Community Alliance with Family Farmers

<http://www.caff.org/>

Fair Trade Research Group

<http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/Sociology/FairTradeResearchGroup/>

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

<http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/>

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (U.S. Department of Agriculture)

<http://www.sare.org/>

University of California Hansen Trust

<http://groups.ucanr.org/Hansen/>

University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program

<http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/>

Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner's Office

<http://www.ventura.org/agcommissioner/index.htm>

Ventura County Farm Bureau

<http://www.VCfarmbureau.com/>