

FARM BUREAU OF VENTURA COUNTY

STRATEGIC PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Farm Bureau of Ventura County has been a core institution in Ventura County's agricultural community since its establishment in 1914. The Farm Bureau (FBVC) exists to support its members through advocacy for agricultural interests and the provision of specific programs and services that support its members.

As agriculture has evolved in this unique county, so has the role of the Farm Bureau. Its crop diversity has expanded: once predominated by tree farmers, its membership now represents nearly all crops in the County. It is one piece of a bigger landscape of agricultural support: once the "only game in town," now other ag interest groups abound, many of which address specific issues like labor relations and owners' rights. Its focus has evolved: while three decades ago the Farm Bureau concentrated on the interests of specific commodity groups, now it focuses on issues that affect all crops and ag interests. Its attention to the interface between agriculture and urban interests has intensified: as the built environment grows, the Farm Bureau has increased its efforts to ensure a mutually supportive relationship between these two interest groups.

Through all of this change, the Farm Bureau has remained true to its core mission of sustaining the viability of agriculture as an industry in Ventura County: "We represent the broad and dynamic interests of the agricultural industry through our diverse membership. We serve members by delivering services, promoting policies, developing coalitions, and fostering community action that will ensure the long-term success of agriculture in Ventura County."

The FBVC focuses on the big picture as a means to keep individual farmers profitable and sustainable. Its big picture efforts, however, have resulted in some members feeling disenfranchised, and that their individual interests are not adequately supported by FBVC. Recently, this has been exacerbated by a "call to arms" by many in the agricultural industry. The Farm Bureau's commitment to collaboration and progressive thinking leaves some feeling that the Farm Bureau is faltering in its vigilant support and protection of the industry, and the farmers who collectively make up that industry.

Given this environment and a growing realization that the Farm Bureau must continually self-examine and evaluate in order to remain relevant, in 2011 the FBVC Board of Directors determined that it was time to explore its current policies to determine their relevance and effectiveness. In order to ensure that the policies are reflective of the organization's strategic goals and priorities, the board initiated a Strategic Planning process with the specific goals of refining its mission, values, principles, and goals; clarifying board structure and board members' expectations and responsibilities; and evaluating its policies.

What has emerged from this planning process is concurrence that the Farm Bureau needs to remain committed to its big-picture goals, and true to its vision and values which call for cooperation, inclusiveness, and respect. It also needs to bolster its efforts to serve its members through clear and consistent programs and services that provide tangible benefits to its members, and emphasize the valuable programs it currently provides. Clarified expectations and delineated roles for the board will support the FBVC in its efforts on these fronts.

The strategic plan provides the following structure which, taken as a whole, reaffirms the Farm Bureau as a relevant and valuable organization serving all elements of the agricultural system in Ventura County. The plan:

- outlines a newly articulated guiding vision, which re-states the values, principles, and goals for the organization,
- presents a new set of policies, modified to reflect the updated values and goals of the organization, and
- lays out strategies to form the basis of a roadmap for the organization over the next five years.

PROCESS

The consultant team of Debbie Brokaw Jackson and Elena Brokaw conducted a number of steps to create the Strategic Plan. The process was as follows:

- The Board of Directors appointed a Strategic Planning Advisory Committee which met four times. The Committee identified stakeholders for interviews, provided feedback on the parameters of the planning process, helped shape the two board retreats, and provided feedback on the draft Strategic Plan.
- The consultant team conducted 20 interviews: with all board members and selected community stakeholders. The discovery process resulted in an assessment of strengths and challenges in three areas: credibility, membership, and governance.
- The planning process continued with two board retreats. At the first retreat the board:
 - Discussed the interview results
 - Learned about and discussed board/CEO relationship models
 - Discussed board function and structure
- At the second retreat the board examined its guiding documents through the prism of the issue areas identified through the interviews. The revised documents reflect the board's desire to improve its interface with members, to operate more efficiently and transparently, and to make sure its goals and policies are current and relevant. Specifically, the board:
 - Reaffirmed the mission statement
 - Crafted new values, principles, and goals

- Revised policies
- Developed initial strategies

FINDINGS

During the strategic planning process, a few core themes emerged. These are areas in which the planning participants cited areas of strength and opportunities for improvement for the Farm Bureau.

Credibility

The Farm Bureau has a long history of successful advocacy for policies that benefit the agricultural industry. One of the strengths of the organization is that it is able to be nimble and responsive to legislation and circumstances that affect the agricultural landscape of the County. When the environment changes, either due to outside influences or internal evolution, the Farm Bureau is quick to respond with well-thought out, cogent action that serves the entire fabric of the local and regional agricultural system.

In most cases, this quick responsiveness goes unacknowledged – as one planning participant put it, “when we succeed it looks like we’re not doing much of anything; it’s the lack of an issue that means we’ve been successful.” Recently, however, the Farm Bureau has been lauded for its creative entrepreneurialism with the VCAILG and quick responsiveness with the ACP Task Force.

The Farm Bureau is also extremely adept at communicating the sophisticated and complex needs of farmers and ranchers. The CEO, with his experience as a journalist, aids the organization immensely in its outreach efforts. This is of particular importance considering the unique position of this Farm Bureau given its proximity to urban interests.

Recently, however, this core strength of the Farm Bureau of Ventura County – its innovation in working with regulators and addressing issues before they become entrenched problems – is considered by some to be a weakness of the organization. Perhaps because of the trying economic environment, some vocal ag leaders have spoken up in concern that the Farm Bureau is too conciliatory, and that it doesn’t “fight the fight” when it should. Some members want the board and the CEO to wade into the legislative fray and demand policy change to benefit their narrow interests, and consider anything less to be a failing of the organization’s duty to serve the agricultural industry in Ventura County.

The Farm Bureau board is clear that it bases its approach to all issues on the individual situation; while some issues require a direct and potentially combative approach, others benefit from a more collaborative stance. This ability to determine the best approach was discussed by the Board during the strategic planning process, and the outcome of those discussions is reflected in the new “Taking Positions” policy.

Membership

The Farm Bureau has been in Ventura County for decades. It is recognized by many as the primary agricultural membership organization in Ventura County. Members rejoin year after year, and take their continued support of the Farm Bureau for granted. While once joined predominantly by tree ranchers, the Farm Bureau has broadened its scope and now has members representing nearly all crops in the County.

The membership, just like the face of agriculture in the County, is aging. It is incumbent upon the Farm Bureau to diversify its membership in order to ensure its existence into the future. This needs to reach beyond crop diversity to include age and professional diversity (ie, including ag support industries) as well.

In order to achieve this goal the Farm Bureau should focus on providing visible and tangible benefits to its members. The Farm Bureau is focused on big picture, industry-wide issues, which leaves some members feeling underserved; it is important to remind the entire membership of how its ongoing programs directly benefit them. The strategies outlined in this Strategic Plan emphasize visible and creative means of providing services to the members. Policy revisions introduce references to serving and consulting members on a consistent basis.

Governance

The Farm Bureau board fulfills two basic functions: governance of the organization, and support of the organization. In its governance role, the board acts as a single body, represents members' interests to the organization, and is the decision-maker. In this role, the board's primary functions are to periodically reevaluate organizational effectiveness; define strategy, policy and programming; monitor and ensure financial health; hire and evaluate the CEO; and represent members' interests.

In its support role, board members act as individuals, represent FBVC's interests to the membership, and act with and at the direction of staff. In this role, the board's primary functions are to act as ambassadors to the membership and to support staff functions as needed.

The Board of Directors of the Farm Bureau is an involved, knowledgeable, and committed group which represents the diversity of the agricultural system in Ventura County. The board has long-term and more recently appointed members who provide divergent viewpoints in order to inform decision-making. The board thinks strategically, from a policy perspective, and does not get bogged down in the minutiae of daily operations, a field appropriately left to the CEO and staff.

While the board is strong, cohesive, and in agreement as to the approach and future direction of the organization, there is always room for fine-tuning and improvement. Although the organization takes great pains to ensure broad-based member representation on the board, there is some sentiment that the board nominations and officer selection processes should be more transparent. As in any organization with a strong CEO and executive committee, other board members may either feel or actually be disengaged from decision-making and policy setting.

In practice, the board operates as a hybrid of two board/CEO models: one in which the CEO manages the board (sets the agenda, produces reports, etc.) and the other in which the board manages itself (officers produce their own reports, the president plans the meetings, etc.). As a governance/support board, individual board members conceptually would like to support staff in many areas of operation, but express concern about their ability to devote more time to the organization. With the CEO clearly at capacity, this begs the question of how to expand the Farm Bureau's programs, particularly in the areas of outreach and membership programs, which are both priorities for the Strategic Plan. A new policy clarifying board function and the responsibilities of board members, as well as strategies to increase outreach and membership support, address these issues.

GUIDING VISION

The FBVC is far-reaching and has a variety of programs and strategies that serve to further broad-based goals. The FBVC serves the farming community as a whole and the individual growers, ranchers, and ag-related industries which make up Ventura County's agricultural system. It also strives to strengthen the connection between the agricultural community and its urban and suburban neighbors. The elements of this vision guide the Farm Bureau of Ventura County in its long-term goal setting and strategic direction.

This guiding vision was adapted from the Organizational Strategy adopted by the FBVC in 2004.

MISSION

We represent the broad and dynamic interests of the agricultural industry through our diverse membership. We serve members by delivering services, promoting policies, developing coalitions, and fostering community action that will ensure the long-term success of agriculture in Ventura County.

VALUES

Integrity
Accountability
Respect
Cooperation
Foresight
Stewardship
Inclusiveness

PRINCIPLES

- We seek to define and advance the interests of our members with an engaged Board of Directors that reflects the diversity and talent of Ventura County agriculture.

- We foster deliberations and make decisions that represent the range of views and interests of members through open-minded, optimistic, transparent, pragmatic and progressive thinking and action.
- We believe agriculture is best served if positions and strategies on issues of potential public concern are developed ahead of time rather than on a reaction basis. We seek an organizational posture that is proactive and positive rather than defensive in nature.
- We promote careful, efficient, and ethical use of land, water, and other resources.
- We believe that a strong, mutual respect and understanding between farmers and the broader community is in the best interest of Ventura County agriculture.

GOALS

1. MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE THE VIABILITY OF AGRICULTURE. To encourage and sustain a social and physical environment that provides for a successful agricultural industry that is perceived as vital to citizens of Ventura County.
2. INCREASE OUR INTERNAL STRENGTH. To increase our members' participation and activism, organizational integrity, credibility, and influence.
3. INCREASE OUR INFLUENCE IN THE COMMUNITY. To expand and improve FBVC's community leadership role.
4. ENHANCE THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION OF AGRICULTURE. To maintain a highly effective and credible program that improves the public's perception of agriculture.
5. DELIVER RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL SERVICES. To deliver educational seminars, content and experience that will increase the knowledge of our membership.
6. DEVELOP DIVERSE AND SUSTAINABLE REVENUE STREAMS. To develop revenue streams linked to services that are relevant and valued by our membership, allowing us to lessen our dependence on revenue streams beyond our control.
7. INCREASE MEMBERSHIP. To sustain FBVC as a service agency with broad-based support throughout the agricultural industry.

POLICIES

The FBVC's policies guide daily operations and decision-making. The core policies have been in place since 1997 and have been modified numerous times.

In 2012, the FBVC board amended the policies to both reflect the current landscape and look forward toward evolving community and agricultural trends. The Board also made edits to clarify some language and/or remove specific references that may not be applicable in the long-term. The full set of new policies is included in this document as an appendix.

The major policy modifications are in the following areas:

- LAND USE
 - Agriculture an Ultimate Zoning:
 - The board edited this policy to articulate that in certain circumstances, development of designated ag land may be appropriate.
 - Economic Units of Production:
 - This was deleted to reflect that in light of the evolving economics of farming, smaller parcels can be profitable and should not be discouraged. Some growers may also desire to split off smaller parcels in order to strengthen their farming business as a whole.
 - Agricultural Structures/Resources
 - The board added this policy, supporting ag structures on ag land.
- BOARD EXPECTATIONS AND STRUCTURE
 - The board added this policy to clarify roles of the board, officers, and committees, and specify expectations.
- ADDRESSING ISSUES
 - The board added a statement to memorialize its obligation to solicit input from its membership.
- POSITION-TAKING
 - The board added this policy to define how Farm Bureau decides what position to take on an issue.
- NOMINATION OF DIRECTORS
 - The board added a statement that it will annually solicit nominations from its members.
- HONORARY MEMBERSHIP
 - Because honorary members have never been appointed, the board eliminated this policy.
- BOARD SUBCOMMITTEES
 - In recognition that this policy actually applies to collaborations and partnerships, the board renamed this policy area as "Collaborations."

STRATEGIES

The strategic planning process illuminated goals for the Farm Bureau, and specific issues to be addressed over the next five years. These strategies are designed to further these goals and address those issues, and are organized into the FBVC's seven goal areas. Initiation and implementation of specific tasks associated with these actions should drive the FBVC's strategic direction over the next five years, and will serve to deliver the outcomes associated with the overarching goal areas.

These goals will be addressed in the annual work plan developed by the CEO for the Board, and progress on these goals will be added to the CEO's annual self-evaluation.

MAINTAIN AND ENHANCE THE VIABILITY OF AGRICULTURE

- Identify and advocate for policies that will assist us to enhance our markets, soil, water, labor, infrastructure, and government
- Develop a water policy, to ensure that farmers and ranchers have adequate and affordable access to this vital resource

INCREASE OUR INTERNAL STRENGTH

- Practice effective communication and positive leadership with local membership and the California Farm Bureau Federation

INCREASE OUR INFLUENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

- Form alliances and coalitions with other community groups and association
 - Partnerships with restaurants and other food businesses to reach consuming public with FBVC "message"
- Involve board members in major issues
 - Replicate grading model

ENHANCE THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION OF AGRICULTURE.

- Forge good relations with the media, public officials, and other community groups and organizations
 - Develop collaboration matrix

DELIVER RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL SERVICES.

- Hire Communication/Education/Outreach Coordinator
- Work cooperatively with willing agencies and organizations to deliver valuable information

DEVELOP DIVERSE AND SUSTAINABLE REVENUE STREAMS

- Consider increasing dues for memberships
- Consider creating additional membership "levels"

INCREASE MEMBERSHIP

- Expand membership to supporting industries and eaters

- Create membership benefit program: discounts from local businesses on tools of production, farm tour, etc.
- Create additional member programs and benefits
 - Family BBQ for members
 - Celebrate the 100th anniversary of FBVC in 2014
 - Institute general “look forward” to identify upcoming issues – yearly, quarterly, or monthly
 - Create regulatory liaison position
- Publicize existing member benefits
 - Involve members in committees or projects

Revised and adopted May 17, 2012