

Vision for Agriculture in 2030 Comments

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What is the biggest challenge in achieving a viable and sustainable agricultural industry in California?

For some reason, words beginning with the letter “W” seem appropriate and to present the biggest challenge – now and in the future through 2030.

Number one – **Weeds** – particularly non-native invasive species that threaten native plants, impact critical infrastructure, lower agricultural productivity, increase the risk of wild fires, and raise the cost of maintaining recreational areas, public parks, roadways, and waterways.

These are not just invasive species, they are “transformer” species that are just as damaging to the agricultural landscape, if not more so, than disease and pest infestations. Invasive weed species such as yellow star thistle, the number one noxious weed in California that currently infests over 20 million acres including thousands of acres in Mariposa County, are a growing threat to our environment and biological diversity. They cause depletion of water resources, increased fire hazard and incidence of wildfires, reduction in habitat for native fauna, and crowding out of native plant species. They have reduced the value of land for both agricultural and recreational purposes, affecting California’s cropland, rangeland, forests, parks, and wild lands, and causing enormous losses of private, state, and federal resources through decreased land productivity. Invasive weeds can cause sickness and death in animals and reduce the value of forage and feed. Mariposa County has a long standing program to control Yellow Star thistle, Klamath Weed, Iberian Star thistle, Tocalote, and other invasive weeds by the use of Integrated Weed Management practices. Public agencies, land stewards, and citizens groups in Mariposa County have joined together to stop the spread of invasive weeds and restore lands and watersheds to a healthy state for their intended use. Unfortunately weed management groups struggle to obtain adequate funding to combat the threat of noxious and invasive weed species. We are facing that situation at present with our current weed programs and I see that continuing to plague us as we compete for scarce monetary resources in the future.

Number two — **wild feral pigs** — again these are invasive species that have a huge impact on agriculture, whether as a disease reservoir for Avian influenza, pseudo rabies, or other diseases threatening our livestock industry or impacting rare and endangered plants and their habitat or destroying greatly needed forage on our drought impacted rangeland or as a possible vector for disease agents into our food supply or contaminating water supplies so that wildlife and domestic livestock won’t drink. They present a huge challenge in terms of their distribution throughout the State and their impact on so many of the crops and animals that we produce and the limited resources (both monetary and personnel) to control them.

Feral pigs have something for everyone – they can destroy your landscaping in a single night; they can turn your rangeland and pasture into a “plowed” field leaving the land open to invasive weed species; they can destroy rare and endangered plants and their habitat; they can contaminate water sources so that neither livestock or wildlife species will drink from them and that same water can serve to contaminate crops downstream; and they can serve as reservoirs for diseases transmittable to both livestock and humans, whether bovine TB, pseudo rabies, or Avian influenza or some other foreign animal disease.

Which brings me to my third “W”, **Wildlife Services** or USDA/APHIS Wildlife Services to be exact – one of those resources that is highly underfunded and overworked. USDA Wildlife Services is on the front lines in the battle against feral pigs as well as many predators, yet we in California struggle each year to fund the program in our individual counties. Costs of the program continue to increase each year and the County share continues to go up as well while the federal dollars remain static and the State, which contributed to the program until FY 2001/02, reaps the benefits but contributes little if anything towards the program.

Wildlife Services personnel are testing animals for plague, Avian influenza, and other foreign animal diseases. They are removing predators on domestic livestock and those affecting human health and safety – bears, coyotes, and mountain lions as well as urban disease vectors such as skunks and raccoons – yet the funding for this program from the State is almost non-existent. Wildlife Services was there on the front lines for the outbreak of Exotic Newcastle disease and they will be there for the next FAD. The challenge facing agriculture now and into the future will be if there is enough funding to keep the program viable and available in the long term.

The fourth “W” is the **Williamson Act** – a tool that needs to be protected and expanded in order to meet the challenges of agriculture in the future. It is one of the few tools available to the farmer and ranchers to help them keep their land and their heritage. It is one of the only things standing between preserving their land and development.

The 1965 Land Conservation Act -- better known as the Williamson Act – is undisputedly the most powerful tool for preserving agriculture and open space and Mariposa County’s rural lifestyle that the county has. Contracts established under the act — which is named for its Assembly sponsor, John Williamson of Bakersfield — last 20 years. A landowner can choose not to renew a contract, but can only cancel it with certain approvals and harsh tax penalties. Supporters of the act say it's essential for preserving the county's ever-dwindling supply of farmland. Without state help to make up for the lost property tax revenue, officials say the county likely won't be able to afford to continue the program. "But if they take the Williamson Act away, it's just going to be one more reason for farmers and ranchers to give up and sell." Williamson Act supporters say that besides preserving farmland, the act helps to steer development to appropriate parts of the county and reduce leapfrog development. It's an important tool in the toolbox for farmers to remain viable and competitive locally, nationally, and globally.

Of California's 29 million acres of farm and ranch land, about 16.6 million are contracted for preservation under the act, according to the state Department of Conservation. Statewide, counties received about \$39 million -- a small price to pay to preserve more than 450,000 acres of farmland. It's a huge return for a really minimal investment and we need to do all that we can to strengthen, not weaken our Williamson Act program. We are perched on the edge of a precipice -- normally I say abyss because I really like that word -- but in this case *precipice* is more appropriate because unlike an abyss, we can see the slippery slope ahead and what will happen if we take that step and water down the only thing standing between food, farming, and open space and **development** -- the Williamson Act. It is important that we remain good stewards of the Williamson Act contracts and protect the integrity of the program. This is not only crucial to participating landowners, it is equally important to all the citizens of the State who rely on the program's benefits to protect their food supply and preserve the natural resources of California. It is a huge return for a really minimal investment and we need to do all that we can to strengthen, not weaken, our Williamson Act program. This is about fighting as hard as we can to keep a tool that not only encourages, but also protects agriculture. It is about preserving the integrity of the Williamson Act and keeping that tool to help the farmers and ranchers keep their land.

The last and most crucial "W" is **Water** -- the most critical factor in Mariposa County and the rest of California. We have been impacted by a drought in Mariposa for the past few years that impacts rangeland forage and livestock production -- both of which are vital to our economy. Wells are going dry and ranchers must haul water to their cattle; ranchers are selling off their cattle, even their breeding stock; rangeland is left fallow; and rental revenues are falling -- the picture is bleak.

As you can see, all my "W" challenges are interconnected and feed upon each other. We need to tackle the problem of invasive species head on, be they insect like Glassy winged Sharpshooter and Light Brown Apple Moth or invertebrates like Quagga and Zebra mussel or plants like yellow star thistle and knapweeds, if we don't address the issue, it will only get worse. The challenge facing agriculture is to control, manage, and if possible, eradicate the invasive species such as noxious weeds and wild or feral pigs, to fund one of the tools in that battle -- Wildlife Services, and to conserve and protect our rural agricultural land by strengthening the Williamson Act which in turn will help to conserve our most critical factor -- our water.

I look at the challenges ahead for agriculture and unlike many of the naysayers, I do see a future for agriculture. The future is providing local food for local populations, preserving the land for the future generations, and showing California that it was agriculture that adapted and overcame, that adapted its vision to meet new parameters and challenges, that when the going got tough, it was agriculture that pulled them through!

Thank you for your kind attention.