

California Agricultural Vision Longer-Term Challenges

Though the workshop process, Ag Vision participants identified a number of other key challenges that are critical to the continued success of California agriculture. Because of time limitations, they did not have an opportunity to develop specific proposals to address these challenges. A brief summary of each appears below. We invite additional public comment on these challenges and welcome ideas for specific actions that could become part of broader strategies to address them.

Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation

Few sectors of the California economy will be as affected by climate change as agriculture. Among the potential climate-related phenomena that could threaten agricultural production are further reductions in water supplies, increases in plant heat stress, decreases in nighttime cooling (needed to break dormancy in fruit crops) and shifts in pollinator life cycles. Agriculture can play a role in mitigating climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and by sequestering carbon. It must also begin now to take steps to adapt to changes that will occur.

Energy Security and Renewables

California agriculture relies heavily on fossil sources of energy for everything from powering farm equipment and irrigation systems to fertilization and pest control. Future supply and cost of fossil-based energy sources are problematic in light of both diminishing reserves and climate-altering emissions. At the same time, agriculture holds significant potential as a producer of renewable energy from biomass, animal waste and other byproducts.

Regional and Local Food System Opportunities

Consumer demand for locally-grown food has been rapidly expanding and both direct-to-consumer sales and organic production are among the fastest-growing sectors of California agriculture. However, these sectors are still niche markets that represent a tiny fraction of total state agricultural production. There appears to be significant potential for the expansion of regional and local markets that all California producers could take advantage of, either to expand their existing local growing operations or to diversify their income stream as a hedge against fluctuations in larger global markets.

Food Safety

Food products from California are among the safest in the world. Yet, rare contamination incidents can undermine public confidence in the food supply and have significant economic impacts on entire sectors of the state's agriculture industry. Measures to assure food safety can also be costly to producers and have negative impacts on the environment. Finding the appropriate balance between a food supply that is safe, abundant and affordable, the economic viability of producers and a healthy environment is one of the biggest challenges facing California agriculture today.

K-12 Agricultural Education

California is an overwhelmingly urban state in which the general public and most of its elected representative have little contact with, or knowledge about, the practical realities of farming and ranching. This is not a desirable situation when it comes to formulating public policies that could, as many polices do, affect something as fundamental as food production. Public education about agriculture and food systems in primary and secondary schools could lay a foundation for better decision making about agriculture.

Updated Agricultural Infrastructure

Like all industries, agriculture depends on infrastructure to obtain inputs, and to transport and distribute its products. In California, this includes everything from water storage and conveyance systems and seaports to regional distribution centers and farmers markets. As agriculture evolves, infrastructure must keep pace. But in our state, a lack of investment in agricultural infrastructure has led to a situation in which it is increasingly inadequate to serve both global and regional markets.

Intergenerational Succession and Beginning Farmers

The overwhelming majority of California farms and ranches are family owned and operated. Their continued success depends on the ability to transfer property and management responsibilities from one generation to the next. Some families are challenged by complicated inheritance laws and taxes, others by the lack of children who want to remain in agriculture. At the same time, an increasing number of young people, including many graduates of California's excellent agricultural college system, want to start their own operations or enter agriculture for the first time, but lack the resources to do so.

Questions for Public Input

We solicit public input on the following questions as they relate to the longer-term challenges identified by the Ag Vision process:

Which of these challenges should receive the highest priority for action?

What specific measures would you recommend to address these challenges?

What are likely to be the biggest obstacles and pitfalls of taking those specific measures?

Are there other long-term challenges that should also be addressed and, if so, how?