

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to participate today representing voluntary conservation, which is our mission and our passion. I appreciate your understanding and support of the critical role that conservation plays and will continue to play in a sustainable future vision.

Translating a business or agency vision into concrete terms is a challenge. One thing that may help me to clarify the NRCS vision for California is to suggest we travel through time to where we want to be and look back on how we achieved this. I want you to join me in imagining that our vision of the future has been realized and that year is 2030.

As I look around today in the year 2030, I see California as a preeminent and respected national and international leader. California agriculture leads in productivity and environmental protection, as well as being a partner in health: the economic health of rural communities; the environmental health of California; and the human health that is built upon nutritious food, clean air, clean water, and sustainable natural resources. The beautiful open landscapes cherished by Californians and everyone that visits this amazing state reflect the working landscapes of ranches, farms, and non-industrial private timber.

Thinking back 22 years ago to 2008, we faced some tough challenges to a sustainable future and are somehow not surprised at all that we have come so far in such a short period of time. The success we enjoy today is all the sweeter when we consider not so much what we overcame, but how we worked together to get to where we are now.

Back in 2008, we knew three things for certain, and dealt with them accordingly:

1. Even then, we knew full well that voluntary conservation in all its complexity in the face of strong regulatory pressure would always be a critical part of any sustainable vision for agriculture;
2. We knew that there were many challenges to achieving conservation, and that the regulatory permitting process had somehow challenged us more than others;
3. We knew that we needed to overcome barriers through partnering and leveraging resources or face losing track of our vision and missing the mark.

I. Conservation is a critical part of a sustainable vision for agriculture in 2030

The productive use of privately owned cropland, grazing land, forestland and other agricultural land was and remains essential to the nation's security and the health and the well-being of its citizens. These lands form the foundation of a substantial and vibrant agricultural economy that provides food, fiber, forest products and energy for California and the Nation, while providing environmental benefits that are also the basis for the health and well being of its citizens—benefits such as clean and abundant water, air, and healthy ecosystems.

In no other forum do private businesses hold more benefit and responsibility to the public at large. Back then, we saw so clearly that government could not hope to manage all these wonderful resources into a sustainable future. Just as today, government funds and resources were tight and farmers and ranchers often make better decisions than we can for their land. We came to appreciate that in order to achieve a sustainable agriculture in the future, it was absolutely critical that the private landowner be in a position where making the decision to embrace our vision was not only

their decision to make, but a beneficial and easy decision to make.

At our turning point, we recognized and supported the need to address vital issues such as productivity, economic viability, food safety, and conservation of natural resources.

Some of the key conservation issues that we have made significant gains through voluntary conservation include:

1. Water Quality and Quantity—the improvements and gains we have made in the use of our tight supply of water have resulted in high quality water to produce food, fiber, animals and environmental benefits.
2. Air Quality—our joint partnership with industry in the San Joaquin Valley has stabilized the soils, reduced VOC and greenhouse gas emissions. Agriculture is achieving its part and is recognized for that.
3. Soil Health—we planned for soil health and sustainability through conservation tillage, cover crops, and wise use.
4. Wildlife habitat and Fisheries—California agriculture plays a vital role in maintaining healthy wildlife and fisheries populations and habitat on working landscapes.
5. Native plant communities—healthy, diverse plant and forest communities that are not overrun with invasive species.
6. Climate change, carbon credits, and energy production—California is a national and world leader in climate change, carbon credits, and the production of alternative energies.

We have kept conservation and the environment as an essential component in our sustainability vision—both long term and project-by-project. Everywhere I travel in California I see examples that we have documented, that others have documented, and that would make Aldo Leopold proud (“If we take care of the land, the land will take care of us”). We reshaped our infrastructure to get to this point. We did it because we wanted to and because it was the right thing to do.

But we could have not achieved all these wonderful benefits if we never dealt with the challenges facing both government and private sectors. Without moving forward with a purpose of seeing more similarities than differences, it would have been impossible to get even half as far as we are today.

II. Challenges to achieving our vision

At the time, the various regulatory and permitting processes often actually hampered the enhancement of the natural resources they were intended to protect. This was not intentional, but a byproduct of complexity from misunderstanding and lack of communication by all parties.

But we rose to meet this challenge. At the moment of our awakening, the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition was born. Formed way back in 2005, this partnership was forged by people, agencies and groups which oftentimes had previously been at odds with one another. Instead, what emerged was a new appreciation and sense of purpose in protecting and enhancing the resources of California rangelands. Most importantly, the Coalition demonstrated the power of agreeing on what we truly value and taking action to achieve those things. The example set forth by the Coalition was bound to become a model for a hundred other efforts in the state and beyond.

Instead of focusing on the permitting process alone, we took a multi-prong approach. We assured continuing technical and financial resources. We came together as state and federal bodies to solve the time-consuming approach typically found in regulatory permitting processes. We developed a new rational process through partnering in the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition and using it as an example of a can-do action plan.

Those of us at the statewide level saw that we really should have gotten together sooner, inspired as we were by the examples of our grass-roots level colleagues. We needed to find as much common agreement as we could to provide and facilitate state-level streamlined permitting in a way that did not need to be repeated in each county or region. We needed to do this NOT to override or bypass resource protection, but precisely because such protection was vital and challenges with the old system slowed resource protection.

We took the maze of environmental regulatory requirements—at the federal, state and local level—which taken together erected substantial roadblocks to conservation—and removed the roadblocks while meeting the original intent of environmental protection.

Consequently, a potentially crippling barrier to achieving our Ag Vision of 2030 was removed. The partnerships forged by this new approach to permitting simplified the maze and brought efficiency into the regulatory arena where multiple goals could be pursued using the same set of parameters based on common sense and ultimate purpose.

Farmers and ranchers regularly partner with regulatory agencies and environmental entities to achieve great works of conservation. There is mutual respect and understanding of the need for farmers to stay in business and to remain economically profitable in order to move forward with conservation success. Today, the private landowner benefits from embarking on projects which involve protecting and enhancing natural resources. Why? Because everyone now recognizes that these projects ultimately serve to sustain agricultural operations rather than hamper those activities which feed our nation and the world.

III. Partnering and Leveraging

I would like to discuss the role of partnering and leveraging, which I believe was key in making conservation efforts integral in our future vision and their success is part of our legacy. We needed all of our collective resources to achieve what none of us could have done alone.

As an example of how this worked, let us consider air quality. Many years ago, California was the first state in the nation where farmers faced regulatory constraints for air quality. But to California's credit, this unenviable position was used as a catalyst to form new partnerships and combine resources. Agricultural interests such as the Almond and Cotton Industry, Nisei Farmers League, Farm Bureau and others joined NRCS, RCDs, Coop Extension, State Agencies and the Carl Moyer Program to tackle the issue.

Even before 2008, we worked together with producers to develop more than 4,000 air quality conservation plans, in a manner that satisfied Air Quality Control Board requirements. Funds from

NRCS cost share programs such as EQIP were matched dollar-for-dollar by individual producers. The State Carl Moyer Program added its share of funds, too.

In less than a decade, the San Joaquin Valley was able to come into compliance with PM-10 laws by the combined talents and resources of all these people working together. Not one of the groups could have done it alone. We replicated and expanded these efforts as we grappled with NOx and PM-2.5. But we had a model of partnering and leveraging that we knew worked for us, and it did.

We found ways to join forces with our various technical and funding resources to achieve our sustainable vision.

“Must haves” in an ag vision for California

We supported the concept for an Invasive Species Council with the Secretaries of CDFG and Resources leading to coordinate the many challenges we faced from invasive weeds suppressing good forage grasses and contributing to increased fire hazard, to invasive species that occupied the habitat needed for threatened and endangered species.

We supported the concept for a Working Landscapes Council with the Secretaries of CDFG and Resources leading to coordinate the opportunities that we had to work together on permit coordination, reduction of excess and conflicting regulation on ag working landscapes such as ranches and farms. The value that the working landscapes of California bring to not only California but to America, was not underestimated. This is a unique climate and ecosystem, one of the most diverse in the country.

Our cooperation and effort helped California producers to be the best in the nation at producing food that is healthy and wholesome, while achieving conservation and environmental sustainability.

We have made huge gains and we are still working on ag water conservation and assessing how to fully utilize all of our technical and financial assistance programs to help in drought situations, be it for a year or so, or for a longer time frame.

In conclusion, thank you for letting us share our vision of ag in 2030 with you. While admittedly optimistic, it would not be the first time that California provided a vision and model of what was possible for the rest of the nation and the world.

I applaud the effort CDFA is undertaking. We at NRCS and I greatly appreciate the invitation to share our thoughts with you. We pledge our support to assisting in any way we can with this effort.

Thank you.

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California