

July 8th, 2008

State Board of Food and Agriculture:

RE: California Ag Vision Session

Overview: Our greatest challenge is to have Americans crave California grown & US produce in the face of globalization and constant supply of their favorite fruits. Americans have lost their connection to the land. To maintain the health of our industry and the health of Americans we need bring the importance of fruits and vegetables to the forefront. We must educate children through school gardens and build demonstration grounds in the Agricultural Districts. We must integrate choices for California grown produce into a life style by supporting healthy choices in school cafeterias, supporting community gardens, and by transforming the Food Stamp system to encourage more consumption of fruits and vegetables. We must change the distribution system to make sure our produce tastes better than what is flown in half-way around the world and educate consumers on seasons. We must enforce country of origin labeling and ensure that our imports are held to the same exacting standards as US Farmers.

Farming is an integral part of our nation's sovereignty. A nation must be able to feed itself, not be dependent on food exports for the health of its people and for political stability. Yet, the health of our farms is being threatened by globalization; the import of cheap food from abroad, not always grown to California's exacting standards. Unfortunately, the American consumer has demanded year-round grapes and apples all the while wondering where the taste has gone. We as Americans have lost a connection to our food. Few of us have had parents or grandparents who have lived on a farm. The season food is harvested is no longer common knowledge. With farmer's markets Californians yearning for taste have been able to find locally grown produce, yet this is not a feasible model for the nation. California farmers need to get back into the hearts and stomachs of Americans. We need to create a greater demand for California and US produce if we are going to keep our farmers in business and successful in this globalized world.

The first step is education. School gardens have been a great step in this journey. We are lucky to have willing and knowledgeable teachers that maintain school gardens and integrate them into the curriculum. Yet, does every school have a garden? Is a garden able to show the entire picture of California Agriculture? As a member of the San Diego County Ag in the Classroom board, we have dreamed of having a demonstration garden within the 22nd Agricultural district. A place for school children to visit, see and participate in food and flower production and harvest. This would be a destination where schools can visit and children can learn about the growing and processing of food, learn about sound agriculture policy, eat seasonal food from the gardens, and meet real farmers invited to speak. Those students that are impassioned by Agriculture, lets help encourage them to continue a career in agriculture by encouraging 4H and FFA programs in urban areas.

Once exposed to healthy tasty foods, it needs to become a life-style. As a nation, our poor food choices will continue to place a strain on our health care system in the form obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. We need to pay greater attention to our children's choices in the school cafeteria. Bring in more fruits and vegetables and less processed foods. Let the children know what they are eating and where it is from. Promote that these melons were

harvested in Coachella Valley, the salad harvested in Salinas, the tomatoes in San Diego County. We need to support community gardens and urban agriculture. These are the people that care about the origins of their food and have transformed gardening into a life style. We need to transform our ideas and realize that these are not the people that threaten conventional farming, but rather the ones that would like to ensure they have access to fresh food and must supplement their harvest with fresh produce grown to exacting standards. With more understanding on how we produce, they have the potential of becoming our greatest advocates. Let us transform the Food Stamp system where there are allocations for fresh fruit and vegetables. Why does the USDA's largest program support the processed food industry more than actually farmers? Does this not further the strain on our health care system? The Food Stamp system should be more like the WIC system where there are prescribed food groups. This would help to reinforce the food pyramid and ensure that children in this program are healthy.

As the public becomes more conscientious of their food choices, we in the Ag industry need to improve distribution channels. After sitting in cold storage, there is little difference between the produce harvested hundreds of miles away in California and the produce harvested half-way around the world. Is there way to create a hybrid between the farmer's market system and our conventional system? Is there a way to emphasize at the store level picked dates, consume by dates, or freshness? We need to educate consumers at the store level where their food is harvested and when product is in season. This is by far going to be our greatest challenge.

Finally, if the public is going to demand US produce or California Grown produce, we need to make sure that country of origin labeling is enforced. This should also apply to processed food. The public has a right to know where their food is harvested so that they can make sound decisions to support US farmers. We also need to market what US grown means and emphasize the standards that US farms are held to. There is no reason that these same standards should not be adhered to for imported produce. Not only would this level the playing field, but it would also ensure that imported produce is not contributing to environmental degradation. Sustainability is coming to the forefront and we need to demonstrate that concern for the environment is being addressed by US farmers.

Through these steps, we have the potential of having Americans appreciate US & California grown produce and meet their expectations of how produce should taste. I hope that we are able to make a concerted effort to increase and fulfill the demand of greater tasting food.

Thank you for your time in soliciting feedback from Californians to ensure that Agriculture has a future in California.

Sincerely,

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