

July 2, 2008

TO: California Department of Food and Agriculture

FR: Greg and Laurie Schwaller (43857 South Fork Dr., Three Rivers, CA 93271; gschwaller1@earthlink.net)

RE: Comments for 07/02/08 Listening Session

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important subject. We are speaking as residents and concerned citizens of Tulare County. Agriculture has for decades been the County's economic engine. Our fine climate, rich soils, and abundant water supply from groundwater and the Sierra snowpack have enabled our farmers to grow close to 300 different crops, to make our County the number one dairy producer in the country, to export products to countries all over the world, and to employ tens of thousands of people, both directly and indirectly.

At the same time, our agricultural economy has damaged our air, soil, and water, and has harmed the health of many of our residents, both human and not; it has damaged or eliminated natural habitat and wetlands; it has wasted quantities of water and soil; and it has created high social costs in the County, not only due to excessive hospitalization rates and premature deaths, but also because farmworkers are the lowest paid workers in the country, and too often cannot afford decent housing, infrastructure, education, health care, or other social services, despite their great need for them, and our great need for farmworkers.

Now our agricultural economy is threatened by sprawling development, inflated land values, decreasing water supplies, spiraling fuel costs, and global climate change. For the health and viability of our economy, our communities, and our natural resources, we must work together to make California agriculture visible, valuable, healthful, and sustainable. This means cooperation, collaboration, and resource-sharing across all sectors; time is of the essence.

**Education** is a key component of this process; neither agriculturalists nor consumers can thrive without healthy soil, clean air, and clean water; we all must learn to see the connections between our actions and their impacts, and how we can work together to minimize our harmful effects and be better stewards. This means significant budgeting for research, development, and new curricula; bringing agriculture into schools and students into the fields; furthering understanding of and appreciation for local production; ensuring that local and regional planners are promoting compact, resource-efficient, healthy communities that save room for farmland, native species habitat, and natural hydrological systems; encouraging the general public and public entities such as schools, hospitals, and governments to purchase locally-grown food and serve healthy meals; and ensuring that natural ecosystem services are understood and correctly valued and maintained.

In order to continue, our agriculture must become **sustainable**, which means that it must quickly and systematically adopt an integrative and regenerative approach that maximizes leverage of natural biological systems, working with and promoting adaptive, bio-diverse production that minimizes use of toxic substances, builds and supports healthy soil, and restores and supports well-functioning natural hydrologic systems. Sustainable practices make agriculture a valued good neighbor that promotes the health of its community. In Tulare County, which often has the worst air quality in the nation, sustainable agricultural practices will also concentrate on reducing output of PM-10 and PM-2.5, methane, and toxic chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides. Animal confinement facilities will construct green buildings and install digesters to reduce impacts to air quality and greenhouse gas emissions. Agricultural facilities will also stringently monitor their impacts on water quality and implement all best management practices to avert contamination and waste of water supply. The Water Board's test data show that 63% of sampled valley dairies have at least one nitrate-polluted well, 40% of sampled household wells in Tulare County contain unsafe amounts of nitrate, and more than 20% of the County's State-regulated public water systems failed the nitrate test. Meanwhile, Tulare County has the greatest amount of groundwater overdraft (820,000 acre feet/year) in the state, a declining snowpack, and a declining groundwater table. This is not sustainable. Tulare County used more than 17.5 million pounds of pesticides in 2005, the third highest use of any county in California. Pesticides banned decades ago are still found in our soil. Pesticide residues are found in fish in Tulare County's Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, whose air quality is often the worst of all the nation's parks. Thousands of old highly-polluting diesel engines are pumping irrigation water in our county; almost all of these pumps could be converted to operating on solar or other cleaner power. To be sustainable, agriculture must meet air quality goals and help to meet the requirements of AB32. Public programs should reward agriculturalists who provide stewardship services, including conservation and enhancement of habitat and natural hydrological systems, and penalize those who do not. Clean air exemptions for agricultural vehicles must be rapidly phased out. Local and state jurisdictions should also work actively to enable sustainable agriculture by establishing, funding, and enforcing mitigation programs to permanently conserve farmland (including rangeland), watersheds and wetlands, and habitat.

**Justice** demands that California's agricultural workers, in return for their very hard labor in all weather, for the lowest pay of any occupation, to grow and harvest the cheapest and most abundant food in the world, should be provided a living wage, safer and more humane working conditions, access to affordable health care, decent housing, clean water, education, public transportation, safe neighborhoods, and healthy food. A healthy, stable, skilled workforce is cost-effective for the industry and for society as a whole.

While enjoying the benefits of our agricultural system, we must also look at its costs. To the degree that we can increase understanding of these and thereby promote and implement sustainable, healthy practices, the benefits will outweigh the costs, and the system will serve us well far into the future.

We expect California to be a world leader and innovator in this essential undertaking, as it has been in other critical areas. Thanks for listening.