

SHARE in California's Food Future

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The bottom line is that farms must be profitable if ag is to have a bright future in this state. The other reality is that globalization has turned on its head a major strength of Ca. specialty ag, its pioneering export strength. Now, vastly increasing volumes of offshore product are driving our value-added specialty advantage down towards the commodity level. Bad news, as state growers will never be the low cost producers. Those that succeed will be progressive, well capitalized, and likely at the larger end of the size scale.

I understand the impetuses and opportunities of organic, sustainability, slow foods, local foods, etc. They are real, but in my view not likely to accommodate the production of but a lesser portion of our state acreage at best. Or if that market demand does continue to grow, then, as is already happening, many of the practices will be subsumed by mainstream ag, in effect simply raising the bar to play the game. We see this in food safety initiatives too. Thus increasing the pressure on the dwindling family farm operations, which have less resources to adapt. For example, here in Ventura County we have around 95,000 irrigated acres. A few thousands of those acres could swamp our local markets with a wide variety of farm products, leaving the bulk of the remaining acres to duke it out through more traditional and distant market channels.

I find it hard to buy in to arguments that by educating the consumer on the value of agriculture, food, and farmers, we will change the paradigm of agriculture to one of partnership with our urban neighbors. This might work for those discriminating consumers at the high end, but most people will still go to the supermarket and buy what looks good and is the cheapest price. For example, studies have shown that while country or locale of origin is a factor, it remains rather secondary on the consumers list of priorities. That said, we should ride that horse as far as possible nonetheless.

There is in coastal California a strong appreciation for the benefits of agriculture, but that appreciation is less for the production of vital food and fiber than for ag's low-cost provision of open space amenities which add so much to the California urban lifestyle. If ag is to continue to be successful 30 years from now, then it must figure out how to leverage this benefit economically. Though currently anathema, at some point a social subsidy may be necessary to keep farm acreage in place. There is no such thing as a level playing field, and our ability to compete head to head with other lower cost producers from offshore may continue to erode.

Which brings me to a couple of narrower but still important factors which this state can influence. One is the strengthening of our state and national barriers to invasive pests and diseases. USDA-APHIS is far more concerned with its trade facilitation mandate than with its historical phyto-sanitary protection mission. In the last few years, we have seen the huge Florida citrus industry brought to its knees by imported pests and diseases. It could easily happen here too. The last decade has seen repeated plagues of new destructive pests affecting Ca. specialty crops, a drumbeat one after another. A signal Ca. competitive

advantage has long been the absence of many pest and diseases that afflict competing production areas offshore. We must not abandon that advantage.

The last factor I wish to mention is state land use policy. In Ventura County, urban growth boundaries have come to be viewed as vital for the protection of agricultural lands from development. Though not without conflicts, UGBs have provided a relative certainty for continued agricultural investment and operation. The other shoe to the creation of urban growth boundaries is yet to fall, which does create uncertainty. This is the willingness of urban populations to accept the densification of their cities. We can protect agricultural view-sheds, but we can't do that and continue to build homes on quarter acre lots. Another land use threat to ag is the wholesale conversion of large commercial acreages into 10, 20, & even larger acre homesites. Planners tend to regard this as still being rural and ag, but the land is effectively removed from the economic ag sphere.

There are many other resource areas of vital concern, including farm labor and housing, water, stressed infrastructure, etc., which many of your speakers will no doubt address. Please accept these remarks for what they are, lacking the refinement and depth of a prepared presentation. If they are of some use, fine, and if not, then little has been invested! Thank you for the informal opportunity to comment.