

"Ag Vision" for CDFA listening sessions

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## ***vision for California ag in 2030***

Greetings from 2030! Our state is now a rainbow-colored quilt of small, vibrant farms. Millions of small landholders are turning out farmstead cheese, raw milk, pastured meat and eggs, grain, rice, and the most nourishing, delicious fruits and vegetables anywhere! Farms are diversified. The land is now teeming with farmers, so it gets cared for well. Farming is profitable and our brightest young people want to farm! Land is worth as much in cherries as in condos. Every Californian now has access to the most vital, nutrient-dense food ever grown.

These millions of small farms are *independent*. Farmers are free to choose *and create* their own fertilizer, energy, seeds, growing methods, processing kitchens, markets and recipes.

Government regulation of ag is minimal and is limited to protecting human rights and the environment. As long as they can meet basic quality standards (i.e., produce nontoxic food – a standard our current industrial system still has trouble meeting) farmers can raise, harvest, slaughter or process their food just about any way they want, at least as long as all their sales are direct to consumers. Intense consumer scrutiny drives farmers toward better and better practices. We have the safest, *most nourishing* food supply in the world. The government does not subsidize agriculture but may provide small grants or loans for farm improvement projects which protect human rights and the environment: a riparian buffer to improve salmon habitat, for instance, or comfy clean laborer housing.

## ***a matter of scale***

Why is it so important that California's food come from many small farms, instead of the same amount of food coming from several large farms? The answer is that small farms, through economies of scale, provide better quality food, better environmental quality, and better quality of life for farmer, farmworker and citizen alike.

First, quality of food. Compared to large farms, small ones are much, much more likely to be using sustainable, nontoxic growing methods. For us small farmers, our workplace is not just where we work but where we live, sleep, play, raise our kids, and eat every single day. It's just common sense that our farms need to be fully habitable every day of the year. We can't take the week off from living on our place while the no-entry period after a pesticide application elapses. Do you think methyl bromide would still be in use if the people who ordered it applied to the fields actually lived there?

But food quality is more than just the absence of a pesticide residue. It's nutrient density, vitality, and flavor. Small farmers sell their products locally because they have no choice. That means our produce gets picked at the peak of freshness and sold and consumed immediately. It hasn't been irradiated, pasteurized, machine-sized, vacuum-packed, deep-frozen and fumigated to within an inch of its life. It's the fertile, minimally processed food our bodies and our trillions of helpful intestinal critters have been thriving on for thousands of years.

Again, we small farmers produce this vital, delicious food because we have little choice. Now, by going into debt and taking a third job, a small farmer can, with effort, turn out food which is just as sterile, compliant, and worthless as his industrial neighbors'. But an industrial grower cannot produce vital, nutrient-dense food at any cost.

Second, let's talk about environmental quality. The State of California throws tens or hundreds of millions of dollars at our farm-caused environmental problems every year. Meanwhile we have perhaps one farmer or farmworker for every 100 acres in production -- and that poor guy may be an illegal who'll be a hundred miles away next week -- and we wonder why we can't seem to switch to drip irrigation, foster hedgerows and endangered species habitat, stop soil erosion, fence sheep out of the creeks, and so on. All of those things require labor and ongoing human oversight! And we've opted for a farm landscape that is practically depopulated. We need MORE people on the land: more eyes per acre, as the saying goes.

Small farms make the most efficient use of land, of water, of capital, of virtually every resource except labor. Large farms definitely make more efficient use of labor. They make efficient use of it by not using any. People have been replaced by machines and chemicals, and on the rare and regrettable occasions when humans are actually needed on the farm, large farms truck in a transient, largely illiterate underclass of mostly illegal laborers who can be temporarily poisoned and degraded because no one is ever going to see them again. If rooted, literate folks lived on the land year-round, the poisons and degradation would be on its way out next year.

On that note, let's talk about quality of life. I am sure there is not anyone who, all other things (such as salary) being equal, would choose to live on a huge farm, with all its standardization, sterility, debt, and dust, rather than on a small farm, with its diversity, fertility, independence and plenty. The small, operator-owned farm is the ideal human living for a *huge* number of Californians. Just look at all the fiftysomething computer programmers and electronics executives whose idea of retiring is to buy a little place and try to make it self-sufficient. I have seen many of these new little farms and I can tell you they are prosperous, orderly, wildly productive, beautiful places. And *tens of millions* of energetic, intelligent Californians would be starting small farms *before* retirement age if they saw any economic future in it at all.

How do we provide an economic future for small farms? I'm glad you asked. Consumers are already ready to support us; all we need is for the government to let go of the scruff of our necks and let us produce food. And it doesn't have to cost the State a thing. Instead of spending millions keeping the gasping small farmer alive with tax breaks and special programs, just *stop* spending millions on all the programs that keep us from succeeding. Repeal the ridiculous, ineffective slaughterhouse and pasteurization codes and replace them with common-sense, verifiable quality standards that actually

mean something and are just as easy for small producers to meet as big ones. Let consumers and advocacy groups write the rules, not agribusiness lobbyists.

My hope is that by 2030, government will make it as difficult to build a 5000-cow dairy as it is now to keep three cows and sell the raw milk to one's neighbors.

### ***our biggest challenge***

Our biggest challenge is the stranglehold the industrial ag corporations have over policymaking. (This is even worse at the national level, so just like with emissions standards, we have to work on Washington if we want to get anything done in Sacramento.) The ag-industrial corporations want to vertically integrate our entire farm economy until it is impossible to farm without buying *their* patented seeds or microchipped animals, spraying *their* fertilizer and pesticides, following the thousand-page regulations *they* wrote to eliminate competition (knowing small farmers won't be able to follow them, but industrial farmers will), then shipping *our* harvest to *their* processing plants to be sold at a loss under *their* brand names. Industrial ag corporations (and their allies in the insurance, microchip, and poison industries) will try to advance their agenda using causes like "food safety," "biosecurity," and "enforcing quality standards." I hope it is clear by now that industrial food is not safe, biosecure, or likely to be mistaken for quality. Please do not listen to these powerful lobbies when they come knocking, but instead listen to small farm advocates like our beloved CAFF and the UCD Small Farm Center.

### ***how consumer perceptions of ag have changed by 2030***

By 2030, everyone knows where food comes from. Everyone has access to outdoor ag education, both in the schools and on local farms. As a result, nearly everyone now considers herself a steward of the land. You don't have to be a farmer to do that (although millions more *are* farmers in 2030): you just have to be somewhat educated about agriculture and know that your choices make a difference.

It is now normal for consumers to visit farms to see how their food is produced. Consumers have myriad choices and take pleasure in exercising their educated judgement. If a Californian wants to, she can buy raw milk, jams, pickles, olive oil, freshly slaughtered lamb, and chevre – all from her neighbor who made these foods in his home kitchen. Then again, she is also free to choose the pasteurized, government-inspected food found in supermarkets. In 2030, we have real choices.

Consumer perceptions of risk have changed. People of course demand safe, clean food, but an *E. coli* scare is no longer the multi-week media frenzy it is in 2007. Folks realize that acute food poisoning has always been with us, and no matter how safe our food supply gets, it's

not going away any more than the flu is. As with the flu, we can all make good common-sense choices and try to strengthen our immune systems, and then hope for the best.

What people are really concerned about in 2030 is *chronic* food poisoning. People are tired of food that contributes to diabetes, obesity, allergies, cancer, and early death. People demand food without traces of antibiotics, pesticides or phthalates from packaging. People demand food that still retains its vital enzymes, antioxidants and good fats. People demand *food that will support life*, which is *not* what we have now.

Food costs more in 2030. Maybe a lot more. But because our food is so much more nutrient-dense, our health care costs are lower. Because our kids get lots of brain-nourishing good fats from raw milk, pastured egg yolks, whole grains and more, they learn better and education isn't such a money pit either. Because farm work is fun and accessible to all, we don't need to spend as much on entertainment. We'll even have fewer allergies! In 2030, we're paying the true, fair cost for the best food on earth and getting a great deal.

### ***“must-have”***

We absolutely need the right to buy farm products at the farm gate. This should extend to raw milk, canned goods, fresh and smoked meat... everything you eat. It's okay not to allow someone's kitchen produce in the supermarket, and it's even okay to set an income cap from farmgate sales after which regulations kick in – say \$25,000 per year in 2008, adjusted upwards each year for inflation -- but if ordinary folks want to come out to the farm, look around, and buy a few jars of my salsa, canned in my kitchen just the way I make it for my family, they should be able to. It's not about my making a living – that's just a side benefit. It's about consumer choice.

But once small farmers *can* make a living, so many other problems will be solved. (And the government will save a bundle in pointless inspections and farm subsidies.)

We need a constitutional amendment to guarantee the right to buy farmgate food. The right to buy vital, nutrient-dense food – food only small-scale ag can provide – is *at least* as important as the right to buy guns. And it's also more likely to prolong your life.