

Farming in Suburbia: A Community Approach to Agricultural Sustainability*

By John Krist**

jkrist@earthlink.net

Abstract

Although it is adjacent to the sprawling Los Angeles metropolitan area, Ventura County remains among the most productive agricultural regions in the United States, the market value of its crops exceeding \$1 billion a year. Yet despite its economic significance and its deep roots in local culture, farming in this Southern California county faces potent threats to its survival from urbanization, skyrocketing property values, and pressure from urban neighbors to discontinue traditional agricultural practices. Since 1999, a group called the Ag Futures Alliance has brought together key stakeholders in the local community — farmers, representatives of civic groups and institutions, environmentalists and farm-labor advocates — in an effort to secure the long-term viability of local farming. A consensus-based organization guided by clearly articulated principles, the alliance acts as a forum to mediate conflicts between urban and agricultural interests. It also develops policy recommendations, and conducts outreach campaigns intended to forge stronger ties between consumers and producers. This paper describes the process by which the alliance was formed, explains how it conducts its activities, highlights some of its tangible accomplishments, and suggests that the alliance can serve as a model for other communities experiencing similar rural-urban conflicts.

Introduction

Once famed for its orange groves and dairies, Southern California is now more widely regarded as the land of traffic congestion, smog and suburban sprawl. Although agriculture ceased to be an important economic force in much of the region half a century ago, as orchards and pastures were buried beneath the postwar sprawl of metropolitan Los Angeles and San Diego, there remains one area where farming continues to be a vibrant component of the economic, cultural and social landscape: Ventura County, located on the coast between Santa Barbara County and Los Angeles County.

With a land area of 1.2 million acres and a population of 804,524,¹ Ventura County produces more than \$1.1 billion worth of crops annually.² This ranks it 10th in crop value among California's 58 counties and makes it one of the top agricultural counties in the nation.³

The persistence of farming in Ventura County, on the suburban edge of the sprawling Southern California metropolis, is no accident. It is the consequence of nearly four decades of deliberate land-use policies, many of them imposed by voter-approved ballot initiatives, intended to concentrate and slow urban development, and to preserve rural buffers between cities. Yet those policies did not entirely halt the conversion of farmland to urban uses. The county continues to lose agricultural acreage, which decreased 12 percent between 1997 and 2002, from 377,715 acres to 332,371 acres.⁴

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** Ag Futures Alliance, 6741 Sebastopol Avenue, Suite. 220, Sebastopol, CA 95472, 707-823-6111.

In reaction to the continued conversion of agricultural land to urban uses, voters imposed even tougher restrictions on urban development in the late 1990s: a system of urban growth boundaries, imposed by a sequence of citizen-sponsored ballot initiatives that took the power to alter city planning boundaries away from elected officials and transferred it to voters.

The political debate surrounding those ballot initiatives — which paradoxically exposed a deep division between the farming community and the suburban voters who proclaimed their desire to preserve farmland — also gave rise to a novel organization, the Ag Futures Alliance (AFA). A coalition whose members represent a variety of stakeholders with an interest in agriculture but frequently conflicting perspectives — growers, environmentalists, farm-labor advocates and civic organizations — AFA operates by consensus and has undertaken an ambitious agenda of community education and social change. Its members are united by a single overarching goal: to sustain agriculture in Ventura County in perpetuity.⁵

Background

Half of Ventura County's land surface lies within the borders of Los Padres National Forest and the protected patchwork of parkland in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Within the potentially developable private land that remains outside those public preserves, the urban footprint in Ventura County is smaller and more organized into discrete communities than anywhere else in the metropolitan region.

Orange County, for example, has about 1 million housing units and a population of more than 3 million. Ventura County, with about the same quantity of developable land but a far different approach to growth management, has about a quarter of Orange County's population and housing units.⁶ Half the privately owned land in Ventura County remains devoted to agriculture or open space.

The consequences of full-tilt urbanization for the region's agricultural base are obvious. Orange County had 60,109 acres of orange orchards in 1950; half a century later, all but 115 of those acres had been paved.⁷ Between 1939 and 1970, the amount of farmland in Los Angeles County south of the San Gabriel Mountains dropped from 300,000 acres to less than 10,000 acres.⁸ Los Angeles County led California in annual crop value in 1949, but it had dropped to No. 5 by 1959 and to No. 15 by 1969.⁹

It is not an accident that Ventura County has so far avoided becoming the nearly unbroken sea of asphalt, concrete and stucco so common elsewhere in the Southern California coastal region, maintaining both the distinct identities of its constituent communities and a productive agricultural land base. This land-use pattern is the consequence of deliberate growth-management policies.

The first of these policies traces its genesis to 1965, when the Local Agency Formation Commission (a county agency with the power to approve or deny proposed annexations, creation of special districts, incorporation of cities, and mergers of districts or cities) proposed a network of greenbelts separating Ventura County cities. The concept was codified in 1969 with the Guidelines for Orderly Development, a set of binding policies adopted by the county and its cities, which directed that urban growth in Ventura County take place (with few exceptions) inside the boundaries of incorporated cities. Those measures were followed in the 1980s by city-specific laws, several adopted by voter initiative, limiting the number of housing units that could be approved each year.¹⁰

In the late 1990s, voters adopted another series of initiatives that came to be known by the acronym of SOAR, which originally stood for Save Our Agricultural Resources but in subsequent election campaigns was renamed Save Open-space and Agricultural Resources.

The first of these initiatives, adopted in 1995 by voters in the city of Ventura, requires a public vote before any land designated for agricultural use in the city's general plan can be re-designated for urban use. In later incarnations, the SOAR measures drew City Urban Restriction Boundaries around communities, prohibiting extension of city services outside the CURB line without voter approval and requiring a public vote for development of any farmland or open space outside the line. Between 1995 and 2000, SOAR initiatives were adopted by eight of the county's 10 incorporated cities. Another SOAR initiative was adopted countywide to govern land use in the unincorporated area.¹¹

During the SOAR election campaigns, agricultural landowners — who objected to restrictions on their ability to sell land for development if farming should one day prove unprofitable — joined the development industry to finance and lead opposition to the initiatives. They were stung by their lopsided loss at the polls. The initiatives passed with overwhelming majorities of up to 71 percent.¹²

At the same time, conflicts over agricultural pesticide use were making news, leading to a demand by a prominent local environmental advocacy organization that the county agricultural commissioner be fired. Stung by their election losses and the spate of bad press, a small group of farmers and ranchers came together in 1999 with the intent of developing a public-relations strategy to educate urban residents about farming and change the industry's image.¹³

Working with a professional facilitator — Michael Dimmock of Ag Innovations Network — the group soon realized that a public relations campaign would not suffice. What was needed, according to several members of the group, was a more comprehensive strategy to build relationships between farmers and other members of the community. A broader-based alliance, they reasoned, might provide a forum in which to resolve or avoid potential conflicts between agriculture and its urban neighbors without resorting to confrontation.¹⁴

The core members, most of them traditional family farmers, invited representatives of other groups and organizations — including their perceived enemies in the environmental community — to join the roundtable, while Dimmock and one of the members worked to develop a structure and set of principles that would allow such a diverse set of people to work together.

The structure they settled on was based on that described by VISA founder and former CEO Dee Hock in his 1999 book, *Birth of the Chaordic Age*: a “self-organizing, self-governing, adaptive, nonlinear, complex organism, organization, community or system, whether physical, biological or social, the behavior of which harmoniously blends characteristics of both chaos and order.”¹⁵

How it Works

As currently constituted, the Ag Futures Alliance comprises 23 members. Eight are growers, five represent the environmental-activist perspective, five are affiliated with civic organizations or institutions, two are farm-laborer advocates, and the remaining three represent institutions with a direct interest in agriculture: the Ventura County Farm

Bureau, the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, and the University of California Cooperative Extension, which administers a trust that provides more than half of AFA's annual budget of about \$26,000 (The remainder is raised primarily through donations by individual members and the organizations they represent.) Members generally serve three-year terms, although they may be invited to stay on longer if the membership deems their perspective or expertise particularly valuable.

Some of the grower-members employ traditional production techniques, while others raise organic crops or employ both organic and traditional strategies. They represent a variety of crop types, from citrus to row crops and nursery stock.

Civic organizations represented among the members include the League of Women Voters, the local newspaper, and a community alliance dedicated to social causes such as health care for farm workers.

The membership categories (and the proportion of total membership that each category must represent) are set forth in a constitution, which also delineates the code of principles and practices that guides the group's activities. Developed and ratified by the founding members of AFA in 2000, the constitution is regarded as a living document and is re-evaluated each year when new members join the organization. In its first iteration, the constitution prohibited membership in AFA by anyone holding elected office, but that was amended in 2003 to allow consideration of such potential members on a case-by-case basis. Invitations to join AFA are extended to individuals only after a thorough discussion of the candidate's qualifications and a unanimous vote of the membership.

The group has no leader, no officers, nor board of directors or other governing structure. A facilitator leads the monthly discussions. Ad hoc subcommittees, some of which include members not part of the AFA roundtable, study particular issues and produce reports or recommendations for action by the entire group. All AFA decisions are reached by consensus of the entire membership.

The AFA constitution sets forth the following rules for group behavior, intended to make it possible for people of conflicting beliefs and attitudes to seek common ground:

Recognizing that mutual trust and a common purpose are the basis for reaching consensus, the Ag Futures Alliance has set forth the following principles to guide behavior of the organization's members as they work to set goals and define activities. We recognize that the current process is merely the first step in a series of continuous steps that are needed to achieve our common purpose.

1. In order to develop mutual trust, we respect the right of each individual to have viewpoints, beliefs and values. This means we speak in ways that respect others' opinions.
2. Those participating in the organization represent elements of the community that are integral to the fulfillment of our purpose. They include: agriculture, labor, environmental advocacy, education, media, local government, and other interested community members with a demonstrable commitment to the purpose of the organization.

3. We actively listen to one another with the intention of building mutually acceptable solutions from identified points of agreement.
4. Through mutual learning we seek common understanding of complex problems.
5. We encourage ideas that are new and creative.
6. In order to protect the process, we do not attack or intimidate others.
7. We seek to forge reality-based solutions. Therefore, we precisely identify points of disagreement and common ground.
8. We use open, honest and robust dialogue to achieve consensus in making decisions. Consensus is defined as a mutually accepted group position or an agreement good enough for all members to move ahead. “Good enough” means that there is no strong objection by any one or more group members and those who are not in full accord give their consent to the consensus position established by the balance of the group.
9. In order to provide space for everyone to contribute, we keep our statements as brief and clear as possible and no one person or subgroup will dominate the exchange.¹⁶

The organization’s goals, as set forth in the same document, are ambitious:

Recognizing that AFA lacks official regulatory power, we believe our influence will come from 1) the moral authority earned by the members’ dedication to improving the community, 2) respect for others and integrity in our dealings, and 3) rising above traditional adversarial roles. With this in mind, the AFA will undertake the following activities:

Build Consensus within the Alliance and Community at large

1. Define the vision that best ensures the future of agriculture.
2. Provide a forum for exploring/illuminating “reduced risk” systems of production.
3. Provide a forum for addressing conflicts and solving problems.

Supply Information

1. Be a responsible and objective voice for agriculture while speaking out against irresponsible actions.

2. Supply general information or context that enhances the community's sustainability.
3. Be a resource to reporters.
4. Provide continuing education opportunities.

Enhance Sustainability

1. Advocate for systemic changes in local rural and urban cultures and institutions that are needed to help agriculture and local communities in a transition toward sustainability.
2. Remain ahead of and propose long-term solutions to challenges faced by agriculture.
3. Encourage adherence to safe farming practices that respect environmental and social needs.
4. Develop a consensus-building process that will generate a blueprint for sustainable communities.
5. Work with our constituencies to help them embrace and to allow collaboration and cooperation with traditional antagonists and thereby alter behavior patterns inside and outside of agriculture.
6. Support the effective enforcement of all labor, health and safety, and pesticide laws to improve access to decent working and living conditions for farm workers.
7. Advocate for increased access to healthcare and childcare for farm workers and their families.¹⁷

What AFA Has Accomplished

The organization's members spent the first year hammering out the constitution and overcoming their mutual mistrust. They were not always successful; one member quit after realizing that her goal of banning all pesticide use on local farms would never be embraced by the organization's other members.¹⁸

The organization's first test — and its first opportunity to influence events in Ventura County — came in the latter half of 2000, and centered around the issue of pesticide use. In June of that year, an AFA member representing the Farm Bureau confronted a fellow AFA member employed by an environmental-advocacy law firm over the characterization of agriculture in a leaflet protesting pesticide use near schools. At the request of the Farm Bureau member, the law firm changed the wording in the leaflet. The two members later approached the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner's Office to suggest changes in pesticide regulation — the first time two representatives of opposing sides had collaborated on such a policy proposal.¹⁹

As AFA members continued during subsequent meetings to discuss the issue of pesticide use near schools and homes, an event in November 2000 brought intense public attention to the issue: A farmer applied the pesticide Lorsban to a citrus orchard adjacent to a public school while classes were in session. The pesticide drifted onto campus, sickening more than 20 teachers and children, including those of some anti-pesticide activists. Fearing that public outrage would force local regulators to adopt excessive

restrictions on chemical application, to the detriment of agriculture, the Farm Bureau representative approached the environmental attorney and together the two AFA members began crafting a plan to preemptively develop a legal framework for regulation that might better balance the concerns of farmers and anti-pesticide activists.²⁰

Those discussions, which involved the entire AFA membership, produced proposed state legislation giving local agricultural commissioners in California greater authority to regulate pesticide application within a quarter-mile of schools, increasing the fine for violations, and allowing schools to include strategies for dealing with pesticide releases in their campus safety plans. The bill was carried by a local assemblywoman, who succeeded in getting it passed and signed by the governor in September 2002.²¹

Since the pesticide incident, AFA has embraced other topics, producing a series of “issue papers” analyzing how local land-use policies affect agriculture; calling for provision of affordable housing for farm laborers; setting forth a set of sustainability principles intended to make consumers, growers and policy makers equal partners in the perpetuation of local agriculture; and describing ways of providing affordable health care and insurance to farmworkers.²²

AFA’s most recent publication — *A Community of Good Stewards: Building a Sustainable Food System in Ventura County* — calls for a new ethic of stewardship with regard to agriculture, describing actions that consumers, farmers and policy makers can take to reinforce the viability of the industry.

As AFA’s reputation for thoughtful analysis of local issues has grown, its members have increasingly been sought as representatives for committees and task forces established by civic and government organization. AFA members played a key role in an Open Space District Advisory Committee (OSDAC) established by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors to draft a ballot initiative creating an open-space conservation district that would have been funded by a local sales tax increase. Although the measure ultimately failed at the polls, AFA’s participation — and the fact that OSDAC’s structure and practices were modeled after AFA’s leaderless, consensus-style approach to issue analysis — provided evidence of its significance in local affairs.

The AFA farm worker housing task force has achieved tangible results, hosting a public summit in January 2004 that drew more than 300 people, 150 of whom signed up to become further involved. It commissioned a documentary film on the local shortage of affordable housing for farm workers, which has been shown to scores of community groups.

The task force now has subcommittees in three of the county’s 10 incorporated cities, and members have met with individual city council members and county supervisors to press for policies and funding to facilitate affordable-housing projects. Task force members also have served as go-betweens to match landowners with available parcels and developers interested in building farm worker units. The committees’ efforts have led to construction of a 24-unit farm worker housing complex in Oxnard, the county’s most populous city, as well as plans for another outside the city; plans for a 100-unit mobile-home development on land owned by a major local citrus grower near the small town of Santa Paula; and plans by a nonprofit developer to build another farm-worker-housing complex near Santa Paula. The committees also have raised \$50,000 to support their work.²³

The demonstrated successes of the Ventura County AFA has spawned an initiative to build a network of county AFA groups through California's agricultural heartland. With grant funding from the Roots of Change Fund, Ag Innovations Network is developing an AFA network, based on the Ventura model, with the goal of linking up to 13 county roundtables. In 2004, three counties joined the AFA network: Kern, Merced, and Yolo. In 2005-06, the AFA hopes to add eight more counties.²⁴

Conclusion

The Ventura County Ag Futures Alliance is not unique. Many communities in the United States, particularly in the West, have sought to resolve conflicts over farming practices or other resource issues through the creation of ad-hoc groups involving multiple stakeholders representing often conflicting views, regarding this as a more productive strategy than litigation and confrontation.²⁵ The Ventura County AFA is unusual, however, in that it is not focused on a single issue of limited scope and duration — development of a timber-management plan for a national forest, for example, or negotiating an agreement to limit the effect of cattle ranching on sensitive public lands — but on the long-term sustainability of an entire industry that the organization's members deem of critical importance to the local economy, culture and landscape.

Members of AFA have, with few exceptions, found it personally and professionally rewarding to seek common ground on contentious issues with people and organizations they might otherwise regard as the enemy. This process of building relationships across typical political divides also enables AFA to exert powerful influence in the public arena: When representatives of the League of Women Voters, the Farm Bureau and environmental watchdog groups all take the same position on a topic — urging elected officials to block a development that would place homes in close proximity to productive agricultural operations, for example — it attracts notice. AFA has come to be regarded by local media as a trustworthy source of information and opinion about issues involving local land-use planning, agricultural sustainability and fair treatment of farm laborers.²⁶

By establishing a shared set of principles regarding the role of agriculture in the community, as well as the industry's rights and responsibilities, the organization built a foundation for future action. By establishing a mechanism for dialogue in which people holding deeply conflicting viewpoints can discuss their concerns openly and seek areas of common agreement, AFA gives its members a powerful voice in the conduct of public affairs. Judging by its success in influencing events at the state and local levels, the Ventura County Ag Futures Alliance can serve as a model for other communities facing seemingly intractable conflicts over land use and natural resources.

Notes

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16. Ag Futures Alliance, *Constitution*, p. 2.
17. Ibid., p.4.
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19. Ibid., p. 24-25.
20. Ibid., p. 26
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22. The issue papers are available at the AFA website, <http://www.agfuturesalliance.net/>.
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24. Ag Futures Alliance website, accessed June 1, 2005, at http://www.agfuturesalliance.net/about_afa.htm
25. Numerous examples of consensus-based collaborative groups working to resolve resource conflicts in the West are available in the archives of *High Country News*, a monthly newspaper covering the region: <http://www.hcn.org/archivesbysubject.jsp?subject=Consensus&category=Advocacy+Groups> (accessed June 1, 2005).
26. McIntyre, *Building a Chaordic Advocacy Organization*, p. 30.