

VALLEY LAND ALLIANCE

FORMALLY KNOWN AS CENTRAL VALLEY FOOD AND FARMLAND COALITION

Our Mission is to Educate and Build Alliances to protect our uniquely productive California Central Valley farmland.



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 3

SPRING 2008

Upcoming Event

By Maureen McCorry

On January 22, 2008 the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition (CRCC) held their annual conference in Sacramento. The most compelling speakers at the conference were ranchers/farmers who are currently partnering with state and local agencies and environmental groups to earn compensation for their stewardship of the land. It was great to hear folks who looked like my grandfather talk about how they had been able to continue their family ranching/farming traditions while simultaneously protecting species and habitat on their working farms and ranches.

Is this unique? Yes.

The CRCC is an example of the effective cooperation of over seventy-five agricultural, environmental, state and federal agencies. The coalition has

redefined relationships and has made a solid commitment to fulfilling its mandate. In 2005, the CRCC drafted a resolution identifying specific rangelands that include the Sierra Nevada foothills, the Coastal Range, and the land that encircles the San Joaquin Valley as common ground for conservation efforts. This land was selected for the diversity of species and habitat that it supports -- which is largely attributed to the stewardship of the ranchers and farmers who own the land.

Our rangelands and foothills are critical to protecting our watershed. Unfortunately, preserving agricultural lands has been framed as a competition: prime (Valley floor) versus soils of lesser value (grazing land and foothills). While it is true that the soil types and the range of agriculture are wide

ranging in our county and the San Joaquin Valley – each serves a distinctive purpose – both benefiting our community – albeit, in very different ways.

The Merced-Mariposa Cattlemen's Association, The Merced County Farm Bureau, and Valley Land Alliance are proud to host the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition for an overview of the work of the Coalition, an introduction to programs that benefit agriculture and the environment, along with an opportunity to dialogue with local officials and Coalition members. We hope this will be the first of many discussions, across the County, on the importance of maintaining rangeland alongside our farmland.



SOS

By Roberta Avilla

Measure E, the brainchild of Modesto City Councilman Garrad Marsh and former Councilman Denny Jackman, became a law in Stanislaus County on February 5th, 2008. Originally known as "Stamp Out Sprawl",

the Measure passed by 66.93 percent of the vote.

For the next 30 years the Supervisors will not be able to change agricultural zoned areas for residential development in unincorporated areas of Stanislaus County without a vote of approval from the county's constituents.



Marsh and Jackman ran a low key campaign without much fanfare. They persuaded voters that it made more sense to keep growth in Stanislaus County's nine cities. Cities already have infrastructure and municipal services such as police, fire, water and sewer facilities to handle growth. See Measure E on p 6

The California Rangeland Conservation Coalition will be featured at the Merced-Mariposa Cattlemen's Association annual Spring Tour in Eastern Merced County. The Merced County Farm Bureau and Valley Land Alliance will be co-hosting this event.

HIGHLIGHTS

- President's Message 2
 - VLA in Action 2
 - Merced Agriculture 3
 - Merced's Ag History 4
 - Understanding CEQA 4
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President Jean Okuye

President's Message

As I walked through my almond orchard today, the calls of the Red Shouldered Hawk, American Robins and White Crowned Sparrows reached my ears, the almond blossoms with a rare view of the coastal mountains peeking through the trees were experienced, and the sweet smell of the flowers filled the air. What a joy!

Then a thought came to mind. In 60 years will my grandchildren be able to experience this? Could life change so much in one generation? I answered my own question. Yes it can and it did, in Los Angeles. Just 60 years ago LA was the largest agriculture producing county in California! We have seen how San Jose paved over

rich farmland.

In our Central Valley, even with so many subdivisions not built out and with many vacant lots and empty houses, the push to cover more of our beautiful soil with houses and strip malls continues. Read the articles in this newsletter about just three places in Merced County where this is happening. There are many more.

The buzz word now is "CHANGE". In my opinion, we need change in the world to slow down global warming, in our country to ensure people a decent education, quality health care, affordable homes, healthy food, clean air and water.

But one change I believe

we DON'T need is paving over more of our precious, non replaceable farmland.

Hats off to the voters in Stanislaus County for protecting farmland. See enclosed article.

PLEASE join Valley Land Alliance and I in protecting our resources and food security. We are in one of a handful of places in this world where we have the soil, water, and Mediterranean climate to grow a diversity of crops. More than 350!

ENJOY the blossoms and other sights and sounds of our wonderful valley.

Jean

Valley Land Alliance in Action



According to the last report from American Farmland Trust, 540,000 acres of ag lands were taken out of production and lost to development in California between 1990 and 2004. That represents the total cropland acreage in all of San Joaquin County, which is one of the most productive agricultural counties in the entire United States.

The area of land that was lost equals the size of fifteen cities the size of Stockton. A disproportionate amount of this land is rated prime.

Agriculture means 32 billion dollars a year to California and another 100 billion dollars in related economic activity. Note, that is billion, not million dollars.

The alarms are sounding like never before. Valley Land Alliance hears them,

and fears for agriculture's future if local and state land use decision makers do not take note quickly.

What are we currently doing to help? Valley Land Alliance is questioning Merced County's use of the CEQA General Rule Exemption as applied to farmland parcel splits. We have been studying and making comment at the Hearing Officer meetings, the Planning Commission meetings and the Board of Supervisor meetings. We are concerned because some land splits are being handled by the Hearing Officer of Merced County without going before the Merced County Planning Commission. We feel that the policy of Convey and Combine is being overused and misused, and that Merced County is not

always using CEQA review when it should. These land parcel splits are converting viable ag land parcels into ranchettes which are specifically mentioned in the Merced County General Plan as being detrimental to keeping agricultural land healthy and in production.

Valley Land Alliance is also trying to keep a vigilant eye on growth all over the county and making comment in order to keep our land use authorities and decision makers aware of the value of our county's number one income source - agriculture.

Beyond Merced County we have been active: First, we sponsored a Planning and Conservation League CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) workshop

See Action p 6





The Spotlight

Welcome to the spotlight, where we take the light off ourselves and let it shine on members of the community. We want to know what other people are thinking.

Agriculture and Merced County

From the Desk of Merced County Board of Supervisor Kathleen Crookham

As my tenure on Merced County Board of Supervisors draws to a close I have given considerable thought to what has taken place over the past nearly 12 years. There have been a number of positive experiences and accomplishments along with some difficult decisions that pleased no one.

The Valley Land Alliance asked me to comment briefly on what I had done for agriculture during my time on the Board. Thank you for the opportunity.

First, I must say that agriculture has been a continuous part of my family in Merced County since 1880. I appreciate and value this long heritage. I also believe that serving on the Board of Supervisors has afforded me an opportunity to develop policy that would preserve agriculture. Many years ago the Williamson Act was discussed and as an agriculture

family, we were assured that it would pass and be implemented in Merced County. That never happened and it was a great frustration to my family and me. Once on the Board and with the help of fellow Board members the Williamson Act was passed for Merced County July 25, 2000. I am pleased to be a part of that decision.

In 2002, Merced County was notified that Vernal Pool/ Species Critical Habitat Designation was being proposed for approximately 300,000 acres in the County. I personally organized community meetings involving all land owners and as a result of the pressure brought about through this effort the number acres was reduced to 147,638. I also have been opposed to establishing a grading ordinance. Both critical habitat designation and grading ordinances would further restrict agriculture as we know

it today.

Finally it should be noted that I was the Board member involved with the University of California, Merced Community Plan. Agriculture was an important component in developing the document and agriculture mitigation is a requirement. For every acre of land converted in the Community Plan one acre of agriculture land of equal or better value must be preserved.

It is difficult to predict the future but I would hope through careful planning agriculture, development and economic growth could work collaboratively together to meet the needs and challenges of all three.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Crookham, District 2 Supervisor, Merced County

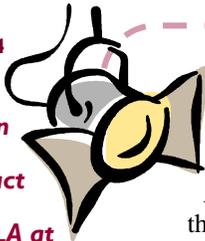


Welcome to our Central Valley!!

By Ross Avilla



“You can contact VLA at info@valleylandalliance.org and let us know what you’re thinking.”



From the Editor’s Desk

By Nicole Alvernaz

As this is now Valley Land Alliance’s third newsletter I thought it was time for the editor to put my two cents in.

You may have noticed some changes from our first edition to this one. But it’s only the format that’s changed, our goal has remained the same. VLA’s goal is to create a newsletter that gets relevant information into the hands of people who care. And to do it in a way people can understand what’s going on without feeling overwhelmed.

Format wise the newsletter has evolved a bit. Our biggest format change is creating “The

Spotlight” where we showcase, ideas and opinions from the public, whether we agree with them or not. VLA’s not interested in just hearing our own opinions, we would like to hear what you have to say.

It could be about development in your area, what you think about what VLA is doing, even about the newsletter or website. And it doesn’t have to be in letter or article form. If you write a poem about your love of the land we’d like to see that too.

But it’s not just grownups we want to hear from. If there are any kids, or teens out there that

read this, we’d love to hear from you.

You can contact VLA at info@valleylandalliance.org. Mail your ideas to PO Box 102 Cressy, CA 95312. Or you can contact me directly at nalvernaz@gmail.com.

If you decide to email me please make sure you put VLA Newsletter in the subject. Otherwise my computer may decide it’s spam.

That’s my two cents for this edition. I hope to hear from you soon.



Merced’s Agriculture History

By Roberta Avilla

Stanislaus County was formed in 1854. There was an attempt to include the settlements along the Merced River into Stanislaus County, but the people who lived in the area we now know as Merced County had different ideas at that time. They heartily resisted Stanislaus County's efforts, and on April 19, 1855 Merced County was created. The very first Board of Supervisors meeting of Merced County was held at the Turner and Osborn Ranch on June 4, 1855.

Merced County started out small in population. The first count taken in 1857 listed only 277 names. Interesting to note was the fact that the same assessment listed thou-

sands of head of cattle.

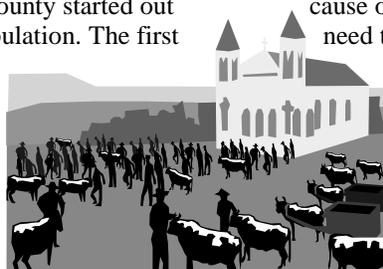
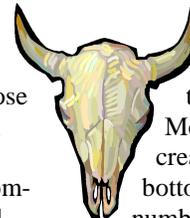
While some of the first residents of the county made a living off of transporting goods for those involved in the gold rush, many were ranchers and farmers. John M. Montgomery, called the money and cattle king of Merced County, established a home on Bear Creek which in later years was known as the Wolfsen Ranch. He engaged in raising stock and farming in 1857.

Merced County became an area to raise beef cattle because of the pressing need to feed men involved in the gold rush. John Ruggle returned to Missouri in 1854 and drove back a herd of two hundred and fifty cattle. His

wife's mother made the first cheese in the county.

The first irrigation from the Merced River was created along the river bottom lands, where a number of small ditches were constructed and water rights were obtained. Several of the ditches were shown on the surveys of the township plats of 1852-1854.

Irrigation districts were formed, train tracks were laid, and land was plentiful. Merced County became a farming and ranching paradise. From those humble beginnings the county has become the fourth highest agricultural producing county in all of California, and the third highest producer in the Central Valley.



Grants

We are grateful to the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, the Rose Foundation and the Community Foundation of Merced County which partially funded this newsletter. Thank You.

Understanding CEQA

By Colette Alvernaz

On January 26, 2008, I attended the Planning and Conservation League Foundation CEQA Workshop by Bill Yeates, sponsored by Valley Land Alliance, hosted by Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition, Moms Clean Air Network, and Stop Wal-Mart Distribution Center at the Sierra Presbyterian Church, Merced, CA. Here is a brief layman's report condensing a seven hour day into a few highlights.

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires certain steps before project approval. Our rights for public participation in this CEQA process "has been vigilantly protected by the courts." This "protects not only the environment, but also informed self-government." The public has an obligation to be involved. Under CEQA law, public response is desired and encouraged. CEQA cannot protect the environment if there are

no public comments. Often the developer is paying for the Negative Declaration (Neg. Dec.), Mitigated Neg. Dec. or Environmental Impact Report (EIR). If there are no comments, it is assumed by the courts the Certified EIR is the best possible plan for the environment.

One public response/comment letter can rescind a Neg. Dec. If there is any evidence the project would have a significant effect on the environment a Mitigated Neg. Dec. cannot be done. The project requires an EIR.

Raise a "fair argument," be as factual as possible, state substantial evidence which includes facts, reasonable assumption predicated upon fact, expert opinion supported by fact, and your experience of adverse effect.

A general statement of concern does not constitute a "fair argument." A factual personal observation or experiences about the existing or unsafe conditions would be a strong "fair argument".

Attend public scoping meetings and speak up. Your comments and ideas are crucial for

your community. Turn in a written copy of the comments.



The EIR needs to consider the past, present, future, local and regional consequences. Required elements of an EIR are: anticipated impacts to baseline conditions, direct and indirect foreseeable effects, significant findings, irreversible changes, growth inducing and cumulative impacts, mitigation, alternatives, water, energy, air quality, climate change, traffic, economic and social impacts, insignificant, significant and social impacts.

Think creatively. Offer alternative sites and ideas. The public review period is short. Divide the issues among a group of people. Comment on what is important.

It is best to be involved from the start, but comments can be made anytime before the project is certified.

"One public response comment letter can rescind a Neg. Dec."



Livingston General Plan Update

Livingston City leaders may not appear to be listening, but the momentum might be slowly taking a turn in the direction of concerned Livingston Citizens.

In September most concerned residents would have told you the Livingston Master Plan would be a done deal by January.

Now we're in early March and Livingston residents are waiting for the proposed General Plan and its Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

One can only assume that enough questions were raised to force the city to slow down its process.

The new City Attorney, Malathy Subramanian, is holding workshops with the Planning Commission and the City Council in order to make sure they understand the Brown Act.

Whether the pendulum will continue to swing toward those who live in the city remains to be seen.



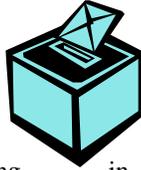
Concerned individuals have refused to give up and hope that the City leaders will pay attention and scale back their 50 year Master Plan.

Contact Community Development Director, Donna Kenny at the City of Livingston for information on the release date of the proposed General plan and EIR. There will be a 45 day comment period following its release.

Ms. Kenny can be reached at donna@livingstoncity.com.

There are only 45 days to comment once the EIR is released! Check our website for details.

Measure E *continued from page 1*



When growth occurs in unincorporated areas of the county, city dwellers end up bearing costs that provide amenities they are not able to get any benefit from.

The Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors sponsored a competing initiative called Measure L.

Measure L would have continued to leave decision making in the hands of the Supervisors. It failed to garner any widespread support which resulted in practically no fund raising for the Board of Supervisor's initiative. Measure E, the people's

initiative, trumped Measure L, the Board of Supervisor's initiative. The people of Stanislaus County called out loud and clear that they feel the need to take charge in order to stifle excessive growth on farmland in their county.

Action *continued from page 2*

where about 40 people from San Joaquin Valley attended. Attendees learned of protection laws which they can use when working to save farmland and our precious resources. See enclosed article on CEQA.

Second, we are in the process of developing a "Sister High School" between Palo Alto High School

and Livingston High School to connect the urban and rural young people. We will again be participating in a field day where 100 Palo Alto High School students will visit a dairy in our valley to learn about farming, land use, water and the history of our rich farmland to name a few subjects packed into an all day event.

Third, we are hosting the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition.

Although VLA provides much information regarding Merced County land use, our mission, is to educate in order to protect our Central Valley farmland and food security.



Valley Land Alliance

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Cressey, California 95312

Feel Free to Cut Out

Become a member of Valley Land Alliance today! Membership donations are:

___ \$15 Student

___ \$50 Family

___ \$25 Individual

___ \$100 We give you a gift!

Checks can be mailed

to:

Valley Land Alliance

P.O. Box 102

Cressey, CA 95312

Or pay by credit card

online at: <http://www.valleylandalliance.org>