

VALLEY LAND ALLIANCE

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



VOLUME 2, ISSUE 3

SPRING 2010

Green Tour

Sunday, April 18

10-5 in Merced

County

Ticket Info at

www.valleylandalliance.org

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Minor Subdivisions - An Update

By Jeff Freitas

Since the beginning of the housing crisis, Merced County has consistently ranked among the most devastated regions in the United States. Central Valley counties bought into the pro-growth hype, and now working people are paying the price. With wounds still gaping, we are already hearing enchanting promises that the market is resurging – along with warnings that you'd better not miss the boat on the low prices! However, most people aren't buying it. It does not take a genius to recognize the harm caused by the rhetoric of perpetual progress and endless expansion.

Perhaps more distressing is the fact that the real estate boom came at a great resource cost to us and our children: years and years of productive agricultural

economic wealth. For every house we construct on a subdivision or ranchette, we lose the ability to capture the sun's energy and soil's productivity indefinitely. Unfortunately, for all the day-to-day economic statistics thrown around, there is little statistical data compiled to help paint a picture of cumulative long-term impacts of local housing.

Although major subdivisions within the city sphere likely contributed to most of the immediate economic impacts felt today, VLA has also been concerned with the cumulative long-term impact of the rise in parcel splits on A-1 or A-2 agricultural land (for simplicity's sake, we'll call them **Ag Minor Subdivisions**). These Ag Minor Subdivisions

enable more development on farmland in the form of ranchettes: parcels ranging from 1.5-20 acres whose primary land use is listed as residential by the assessor.

Between 1998-2008 there was a large spike in the use of Ag Minor Subdivisions. One immediate effect of these splits is that the value of the land increases. This increases an owner's incentive to stop farming and "collect" on the immediate value of the land by selling it, often to multiple new owners. However, the long term effects of increased subdivisions may not be seen for many years to come.

Continued on page 4

Ag/Art Nature Tourism

Monthly meetings have produced a plan for this year. First of all, a name was chosen for this group interested in developing tourism in Merced County. Country Ventures-Ag, Art, & Nature Tourism in Merced County is the full name, Country Ventures for short.

The group decided to focus on following what Stanislaus County has done: make audio CDs for people traveling in our area. The first CD is planned for the area along Highway 140 from the Mariposa County Line to the Bradley overpass near Merced

City. The California Women for Agriculture, an active organization in Merced County is in the process of developing signs for this eleven mile well-traveled stretch of road. A logo, MercedMade, will be explored in the near future. For now, the group is communicating with the County to explore ways we can promote this wonderful area as a destination, not a place to pass through. Keep an eye out for signs along Highway 140 between Merced City and the Mariposa County Line!

Country Ventures plans to continue to meet monthly to promote tourism to educate and provide recreation to travelers. With the General Plan Update for Merced County being discussed, the group will continue to encourage strong support for agriculture tourism. Anyone interested in joining in? Please speak up.



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President's Message



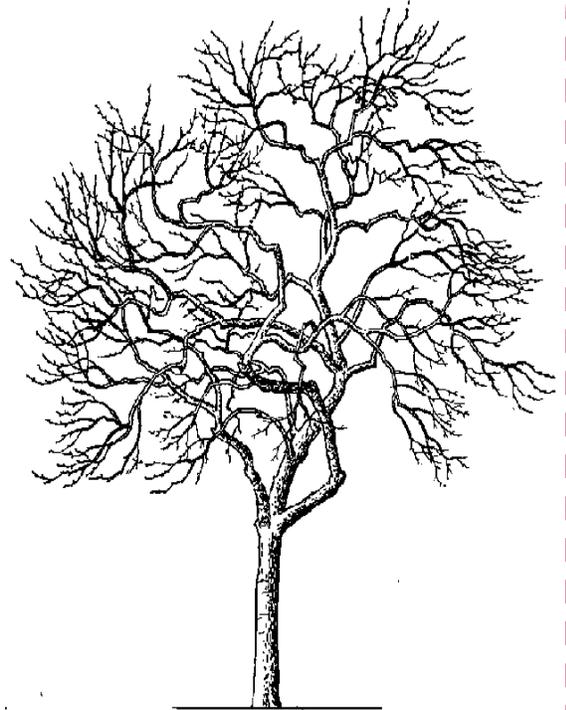
President Jean Okuye

Spring is here as can be seen by the country turning green and interspersed with flowers. Green is not only the prominent color of Spring, it is also a term we often hear lately to describe a way of living which is not damaging to our environment. Living 'green' conserves water and other natural resources, is a healthy way to live and can save us all money in the long run.

VLA is sponsoring, with the help of UCMerced, a Green Tour which will give visitors some "green"

ideas they can take home. Check out the article about the tour in this newsletter. All money generated from the tour will be used for "green" education. Enjoy.

I am pleased to announce the Rose Foundation has again



awarded VLA with their maximum Northern California Environmental Grassroots Fund grant. We are grateful for their continued support. We wish to thank all of you also for you support which makes it possible for us to continue our efforts

to save our farmland in our valley.

Thank you.
Sincerely,
Jean

**Thank you to the Rose Foundation
Grassroots Fund. They graciously
awarded VLA a grant for a third year!**

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.

An Argument Against New Dams

By David Cehrs Ph..D (Hydrology)
Farms 140 acres east of Sanger



During our current water crisis agriculture has been lobbying for new water infrastructure, including dams. I have an alternate view of the situation: if new dams are built, agriculture will lose the water and lose it to the municipal populations of southern California and the Bay Area. Why? Because they have the money and the vote. And there are other ancillary downside problems with losing this dam water, including: loss of irrigation water, loss of incidental recharge, increased groundwater pumping to replace the lost surface water, and increasing depth to groundwater costing more to pump.

Now let's look at the first way we will lose the water, money. The US Bureau of Reclamation in its scoping process for new storage on the San Joaquin River has said that the water from any structure will not be subsidized. Any water purchaser will pay full price for the water. The unsubsidized, amortized cost of the water could easily exceed \$1,000/AF. Ag can not compete with municipal/industrial water purveyors on cost. Currently the Metropolitan Water District of southern California is paying up to \$1,7000/AF for water conservation measures, they will gladly pay \$1,000/AF for real water. More recently, the sale of water rights by the Dudley Ridge Water District in the southern San Joaquin Valley to the Mojave Water Agency for \$5,250/AF has decidedly increased the price municipalities will pay for water. In early October California State Treasurer Lockyear indicated that he believes water users should pay for water improvements as a matter of equity and fiscal prudence, possibly indi-

cating a new trend of less state water infrastructure funding.

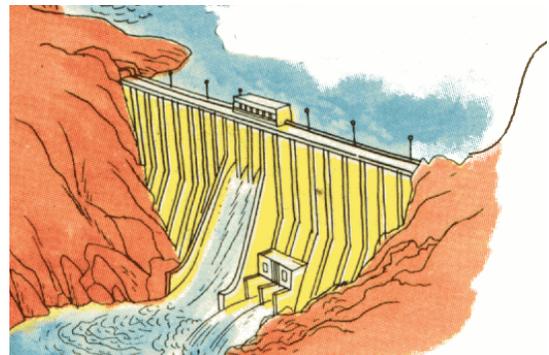
How will votes, politics, and the law affect water policy? In 2007 the Proposition 50 bond grant monies were to be split between 1) the Bay area, costal California, and southern California and 2) the Central Valley and eastern California for water infrastructure projects. Group one was to be funded in the first year and group two in the second year. After group one was awarded its grants, they lobbied Sacramento that the second round monies should be given to them to finish their projects. Sacramento said yes! The ensuing furor and a major lobbying effort from the Central Valley and eastern California was necessary to recapture its share of infrastructure bond money. This fight was only over money, not real water. The political clout of the major population centers is tremendous and can not be ignored.

During the summer of 2005 a US Congressional Subcommittee on Water and Power was convened in Fresno to discuss San Joaquin River storage increases. The subcommittee chairwoman, Grace Napolitano of Los Angeles, said If we're going to get any water, we have to stick together. She definitely felt that her southern California district was entitled to and going to get some of that stored water. Representative Napolitano has at least 17 other fellow LA basin representatives that would love to join her in her quest for water. It should be noted that only 17 of California's 53 congressional districts have a major rural/agricultural component to them.

The final political blow to agricultural water is California water law which indicates water, during times of drought or need, always goes to the high-

est and best use, that is domestic use. Domestic use always trumps agricultural use. Even if agriculture were to acquire excess water it can be taken by needy domestic use.

So are there alternatives to building new dams that would secure water for agricultural use and not lose it to the major metro areas? Yes. Re-operate the extant dams to maximize the water catch and then store the water in the underground. Not only would this alternative be cheaper than dams but it keeps the water local and actually catches more water than dam storage would. So how does this work? First dams must be re-operated to act like a rectifier converting an input alternating current (AC) to an output direct current (DC). The dams would need to be empty beginning December 1st to catch any warm rainfall on snow winter floods and the spring runoff. Secondly, this caught water would then be released at a constant rate to groundwater recharge facilities situated throughout the area below the dams. To accomplish this more recharge facilities, ditches and pipelines are needed. The major downside to this method is that water stored in the subsurface must be pumped at a cost. With this scenario water remains local and widely distributed helping the agricultural community, instead of losing this resource to the metropolitan areas.



Subdivisions *continued from page 1*

"In short: it is up to us to read the fine print before we sign the dotted line."

Of course, development and real estate interests have been eager to prophesize jobs, growth, and profits to citizens of Merced County ... but often neglect to disclose the risks and long-term costs. Remember the City of Merced struggling to recover their money to complete the half-built subdivisions? Remember when Riverside Motorsports Parkway left Merced County with \$150,000+ in unpaid bills? And we have not begun to mention the environmental impacts.

In short: it is up to us to read the fine print before we sign the dotted line. The California Environmental Quality Act, CEQA for short, is the most important tool available to reveal that 'fine print'.

John Van de Kamp, former California Attorney General, sums up the essence of the CEQA, in one simple exchange:

Question: How does one protect oneself against the onslaught of growth, development, and harmful industrial practices?

Answer: By enforcing the exercise of care.

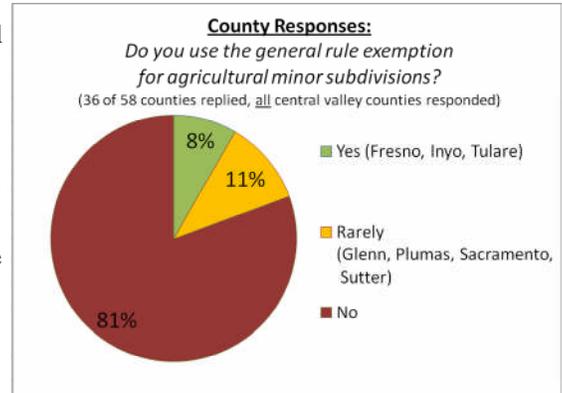
Bill Lockyer, former California attorney general and current state treasurer, put it this way: "CEQA's purpose is its genius...to foster transparency and integrity in public decision-making while forcing consideration of the full scope of the impacts development activities have on our natural and human environments"

CEQA is far-reaching and complex, but to everyday citizens, it provides an opportunity to participate effectively in all steps of the environmental review process. To paraphrase: it requires businesses and government to do their homework before implementing a project, and allows citizens to grade

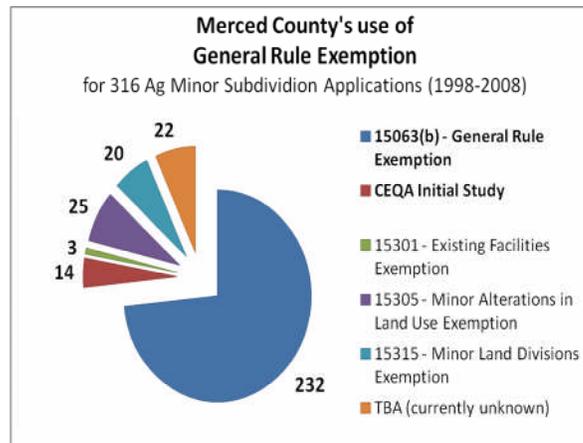
it and/or reject it. For Ag Minor Subdivisions, this means conducting an **initial study** to find any potential effects that threaten our safety or the environment's vitality.

However, Merced County has been reluctant to exercise the care that CEQA requires. By using something called the **General Rule Exemption**, the county successfully avoids researching potential impacts, and instead skips straight to "go". Between 1998 and 2008, Merced County avoided conducting an initial study for over 70%

the general rule at all, or B) used it only for rare circumstances.



Many of the replies we received mirrored that of Zack Wood, planner at Alpine County: "That one sounds pretty touchy. It's a hard one to say that any project is not going to have any effect. As a county planner I would have a



tough time using that portion of CEQA."

...and Adam Rush, of Riverside County: "The planning Department has cycled away from using this Exemption based on advice from our County Counsel and based upon recent case-law from the CA Court of Appeals

of agricultural parcel splits, as illustrated in the graph below.

This frequent dismissal of CEQA through the use of the 'General Rule Exemption' prompted us to ask other counties whether they use the controversial exemption as well. Of the counties that replied, 9 out of 10 counties said they either A) did not use

and the CA Supreme Court that has invalidated this exemption in some instances."

But in October 2008, Merced County released a study to support their use of the general rule exemption, concluding that "there is no significant environmental impact from Minor Subdivision activity over the past ten years."

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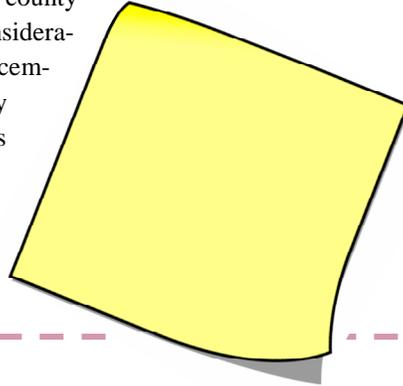
Subdivisions *continued from page 4*

Unfortunately, the study focused primarily on the number of dwelling units recently built on ag minor subdivisions – specifically parcels split between 1998 and 2008. Although we feel that this is an important indicator, it often takes years before an agricultural lot split is sold or developed. Therefore, we feel additional statistics such as ownership history, water access, and soil types are needed to properly discern potential impacts of minor subdivision activity.

In conclusion, we are nearing the end of our research to gain a clearer

picture of what cumulative impacts Ag Minor Subdivisions may have on agricultural land. Our previous difficulties in obtaining information from the county were helped considerably when, in December 2009, county staff provided us with many of the electronic records we requested so

that we could finally bypass the imposed 2-hour viewing time-limit. We are near completion of the study and will keep you posted with the results.



The Time Has Come

By Roberta Avilla

These are exciting times in Merced County. After thousands of hours of research and hundreds of meetings with concerned citizens and experts in farmland preservation, a Save Farmland Ballot Initiative is in the works for the November, 2010 election.

This is the first measure to be put on the ballot in Merced County's history that will give residents an individual vote to slow the loss of our farmland. This proposal will apply to lands that are currently designated for either agricultural or open space uses. These lands could not be converted to residential use without the vote of the public with this measure.

Currently, land use designations can be changed only by public officials. But if the Save Farmland initiative is voted into place favorably by Merced County voters, the lay of the land will be governed by Merced County residents themselves.

This initiative does not apply to farm worker housing or housing that needs to be built to meet the County's "fair share housing" obligations. It does not interfere with industrial land uses or commercial growth, nor does it dictate to the

incorporated cities of the county how they should use their land. However, it does prevent new cities from sprouting up on unincorporated county land and it encourages growth into incorporated cities where infrastructure is already in place to handle growth.

An initiative similar to this called 'Stamp Out Sprawl' has already been voted into place in Stanislaus County. It is hoped that Merced County can enact its own farmland protection plan before pressure builds again on county farmland from the High Speed Rail, an economic rebound, large scale developer interests or investor buying.

By directing housing into incorporated cities and away from Merced County's economic generator, which is farming, it is hoped that Merced County property values will improve through a better managed growth plan. There is already land in place in the various incorporated cities of our county to handle growth for twenty more years, perhaps even longer.

Residents of incorporated cities bear the burden of costs for fire and police protection when unincorporated county

land is urbanized. It simply is not cost effective to build in outlying areas of the county.

By keeping our farmland and open spaces as free from urbanization as possible more water can go into our aquifers, traffic congestion decreases as people have to travel less when they live where they work and shop, and our farmers do not have to worry about urban encroachment on their farming practices.

Our current General Plan update favors creating new cities. These cities can take decades upon decades to build up enough infrastructure to provide adequate schools and fire and police protection. In the meantime, it is the residents of the cities who bear the brunt of the costs to keep these new cities thriving. It is the equivalent of double taxation and it is simply an inefficient way to operate.

The time is now to take this troublesome bull by the horns and put a stop to urban sprawl in Merced County. Our farmland, open spaces, natural habitats and natural resources are simply too precious to waste any longer.





Palo Alto Experience

By Kirandeep Sahota, Livingston High School Student

"We went to an organic hardware store where we learned about the importance of organic products, and information relating to organic plants. "

On March 26th, 2010 eight members of Livingston High School's Key Club attended an overnight trip to Palo Alto. While they were there to learn about organic and natural resources, the students experienced many new and fun things. The eight members that attended were: Adela Ramos, Esmeralda Meza, Evelyn Bucio, Kirandeep Sahota, Mara Fuentes, Olga Lozano, Sareena Rai, and Tania Meza. Kirandeep Sahota reported on the experience in Palo Alto.

The day started with everyone taking a tour of the Sunol Water Temple. There we learned about a dam that was built a long time ago that prevented another possible site like Yosemite from being formed. After this, we met up at Palo Alto High School where we were supposed to take a tour of the school but it was unfortunately canceled at the last minute. Around lunch time, we voted on whether or not to go to Kirk's Burgers, which was a very hard decision to make, as a large number of the students were vegetarians, however they were outnumbered and outvoted, so we proceeded to eating at Kirk's. Afterwards, we continued our site viewing by touring Stanford University. Our tour guide was a past Key Club president, so it was interesting to see how he got accepted into such a prestigious university. He took us to the Campus Chapel. In the Chapel were beautiful

stained glass windows alluding to events from the Bible. After this we moved on to the Museum of Art. This was an amazing museum filled with both modern and historical art pieces. Once we had viewed most of the pieces, we headed over

to the campus bookstore where we searched for souvenirs

When all of us were tired and satisfied with our shopping experience, we boarded the van and got lost attempting to find the Cassidy home where us girls would be staying for the night. After finally finding the house we waited for the Palo Alto Key Clubbers to come to dinner. As we waited we chose to decorate candles. Once a majority of the Key Clubbers had arrived, we ate a dinner that consisted of pasta, salad, and garlic bread. After concluding with dinner we next had a meeting discussing summer plans with Palo Alto students. We decided on working at the county fair; after the meeting we went to sleep.

The following morning, we woke up early to eat breakfast without the presence of adults. After breakfast, we helped critique book pages for an upcoming book that Mr. Cassidy (Klutz factory writer) was working on. The book was about inventions and we were told to grade them on a scale of ten. We were so fascinated by the inventions and the book that he took us to the Klutz factory. There we saw first hand how a book factory operated. As we left, we were fortunate to be told that we could each keep a book. His thoughtfulness touched us and we greatly appreciated his generosity



and kind gesture. After this, we went to an organic hardware store where we learned about the importance of organic products, and information relating to organic plants. By the time we were thoroughly informed about organic and natural resources it was lunch time. We had a picnic in the park which Mrs. Koch packed. Mr. Vierra especially enjoyed the peanut butter cookies.

During our down time, we decided to go back to Stanford and take a tour of the science department. We didn't quite understand what we were being given a tour of but it was fun watching the different parts. After this, we watched the Palo Alto High School Students take first place in the science academic competition which was also held at Stanford University. When this ended we felt Mr. Vierra had only been taking us to places that he wanted to go to, so we asked him if we could go to Tracy Mall, to our surprise he agreed. When we finally headed home we only stopped at a McDonalds to eat dinner then came home. Overall this trip was fun as we got to meet new people and view spectacular sites; it didn't hurt to throw in Mr. Vierra's singing and dancing to songs in the van. I would like to take a trip like this again if I had the opportunity to.



Valley Land Alliance In Action



- Daily updated website,
- Organized and led Ag/Art/Nature Tourism

meetings: Nov. 16 and Dec 14, Jan 11, Jan 15, Feb 3: speakers were Penny Leff with UCCE Small Farm Center and Mr. Griffith and Tom Murphy from Winton Ireland Strom Green Ins. Agency: topics were study of other county organizations and risk management/insurance

- Attended and spoke at plan-

ning commission and county supervisor mtgs.

- Planned for Palyliving high school meeting in Palo Alto
- Planned for green tour with Mark Maxwell at UC Merced and hosts (see article)
- Met with Calif Women for Ag re tourism support
- Attended Los Banos planning mtg for Tomato Festival
- Met with Stanislaus concerned citizens (10 organizations to protect quality of life issues)
- Attended Modesto Irrig Dist mtg re 160 acres of solar panels on prime farmland
- Attended Planning Conservation League annual symposium

in Sac.

- Continued gathering data at Merced County Plan Dept 2 hours/week
- Attended Heartland Festival mtg,
- Visited Palo Alto Feb. 26-27 with 8 students from Livingston HS. Met with Palo Alto HS students (see article)
- Attended Stanislaus Co. Roundtable annual event in Riverbank which is a model for collaboration of agencies, businesses nonprofits, interested citizens to promote tourism and education

Organic Cheese Makes Merced County Proud

On every even numbered year since 1958 Wisconsin has held the World Championship Cheese Contest. This year the entries exploded to 2,313 different cheeses and butters from 20 different nations. Cheese from every continent in the world was entered into the competition. A panel of 30 esteemed cheese experts from 12 different nations judged the 80 different classes of cheese and butter. This competition is considered one of the premier competitions of its kind in the world.

What makes this year, of this particular competition, so special? One of our very own organic dairies came home a winner. Winning a fifth place out of 59 entries in the class of Open

Hard Cheeses was a Gouda style cheese called, Benina Crema, from the Burroughs Family

Farms which consist of California Cloverleaf Farms and Full Circle Dairies.

The Benina Crema cheese was in stiff competition. Looking at the lineup one could see that Austria, Switzerland and The Netherlands took the top three places in this class.

Benina Crema is described as having extra rich creaminess, sweet grassy flavors and a buttery texture. The flavor has a finish of slight notes of caramel.

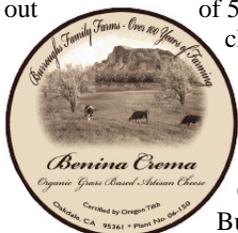
Milk from the Burroughs Family Farms comes from cows which graze on a rich organic diet of grasses, legumes, clovers and herbs. Because the milk is high in beta carotene, no additional colors were needed to give the cheese a deep yellow color. Cheese making follows their milking season which runs from March through November of each year.

The Burroughs family farms are committed to sustainable family farming and the preservation of farm

land. Their seasonal grass based farms are operated with simplicity as God intended working with nature.

The animals graze on land that stretches across the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The taste and quality of their cheeses reflects the diverse pastures and soils. The careful tending of the land and the animals at the Burroughs seasonal grazed based dairies have resulted in a cheese that merits accolades from an international community of cheese makers.

Burroughs Family Farms...we salute you, job well done!



Green Tour Celebrating Earth Day



A first time opportunity to visit homes, businesses and gardens in Merced County which feature ideas for *healthy, economical living and environmental performance*.

Drought tolerant, low maintenance

gardens, geothermal heating/cooling, recycled materials, Leading in Energy and Environment Design (LEED) awards winners, solar, whole house fans and more!

More information and to purchase tickets (\$10) visit

www.valleylandalliance.org

When: Sunday, April 18 from 10-5

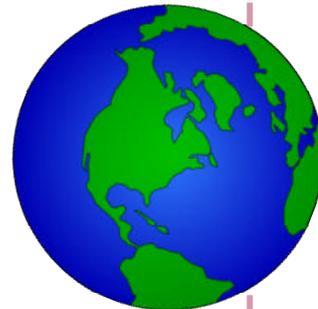
Where: Visit

www.valleylandalliance.org for details and tickets

Why: Learn how to save money, live a healthier life, be more sustainable

How: Get tickets online or day of event at UCMerced, Forte Frozen Yogurt or Okuye Strawbale house.

All money generated will be used to educate about GREEN LIVING.



Valley Land Alliance

PO Box 102

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

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