

VALLEY LAND ALLIANCE

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



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Please contact us if you would prefer to NOT have us mail you our newsletter. It is available online or we can email it to you. Just send your email information to info@valleylandalliance.org.

Subdivision

A Minor Subdivision in Merced County is an administrative approval process that allows an owner to split a parcel into 2-6 smaller parcels. The parcelization and paving of farmland has been



shown by American Farmland Trust to endanger the viability and economic productivity of agricultural land in Merced County and throughout California.

Two and one half years from the time VLA, at the suggestion of more than one attorney, began collecting data and analyzing the Minor Subdivisions of Agricultural Land in Merced County, a Report is now complete, to be released to the public in August.

Below are some findings taken from this report:

.....Between 1998-2008, 349 subdivision maps were recorded, 58,891 acres were divided and 847 parcels were created

.....83% of the groundwater pumping in Merced County is by private unregulated

wells. Groundwater levels dropped 15 feet, on average, over the past two years (2008-2010)

.....550,000 acres are suitable and viable for production agriculture, according to use codes. Merced County claimed that 1.18 million acres of our land is "suitable and viable for production"

.....40% of our land is recreational or underdeveloped. Merced County claimed 93% of our land is "suitable and viable for pro-

duction"

.....Minor Subdivision activity appeared to closely correlate with high real estate values

.....50% of minor subdivisions were sold to a different surname. However, Merced County claimed 4.3% of minor subdivisions were for sale and most were for family planning purposes.

..... 17% (218,000 acres) of the land in Merced County sustains 100% of the edible fruits, vegetables, nuts and grains.

Check our website www.valleylandalliance.org for this soon to be released report.

"Please contact us by email: info@valleylandalliance.org for a copy of our Merced County report"

HIGHLIGHTS

- President's Message 2
- The Spotlight 3
- Palo Alto Experience 4
- VLA in Action 5

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President's Message



President Robby Avilla

When we started Valley Land Alliance residential sprawl over our Central Valley farmland was at epidemic levels. We watched in horror as productive fields became paved over with mini-malls, homes and roads at such a fast pace. It was frightening to think of how long this process might continue on unchecked and unwarranted. Could there really be a need for that many homes in Merced County? Where were all of these people coming from? Where were they going to find employment? How would our schools incorporate all of the new children of these families? When would this unprecedented march subside and stop covering up the land we derive so much healthy food from?

It was truly an unsettling time in our county's history. We came together with the mutual concern of protecting the farmland that had served our local economy so well for several generations. It was fun and challenging to create a name and form a vision for the scope of the work we felt compelled to tackle.

First came the name. We wanted something that sounded strong, rooted and built to last. Everyone in our group felt tethered to this land we call home; this valley we cherish. We also wanted to help bolster others who shared our collective vision. So, after many attempts, we came up with the

name, Valley Land Alliance.

Next came a vision for the work at hand. So often a group starts out in one direc-



tion and then events dictate a different approach altogether. This progression can tear a group apart. I recently reread our original goals which can be found at www.valleylandalliance.org. I was amazed that we are still treading the same path we laid out so many years ago.

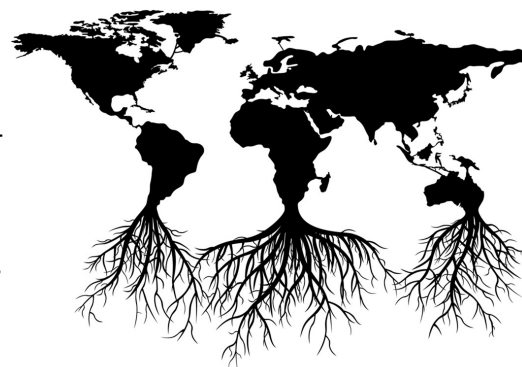
With the pressures of a growing world population coupled with severe drought in several regions, depleted or degenerated water sources in numerous countries, global warming and political unrest, it is even more urgent that we protect our food sources today than it was when VLA was just beginning.

Our first goal was, "Ensure a safe, domestic food supply." Our

last goal was, "Support growth that is compact and maximizes density within existing city boundaries." We have spent literally thousands and thousands of volunteer hours in those efforts. It is affirming that in those first meetings when we were fresh, vigorous and a bit naive we could brainstorm what has become a solid working effort that continues on to this day.

The greatest bit of luck of all was that we have had such an incredible group of supporters. We don't always take time in our work to stop and thank those of you who have sent us a check, helped us when push came to shove, or just encouraged us. You know who you are. We know who you are as well because you provide us with the energy to go on. In the end, support and encouragement like yours is the key to an organization that can keep on track, and continue year after year to fight on behalf of protecting this incredible land which sustains us all.

Robby Avilla



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.

Los Banos Tomato Festival

A sleeping giant has been awakened on the west side of the County as the Los Banos Chamber of Commerce brings back the Los Banos Tomato Festival. Rhonda Lowe, chair of the Tomato Festival, formed a committee and they held their first planning meeting in November 2009. All of the major tomato processors came on board as sponsors early on, including Morning Star who is the Premier Sponsor, Kagome and Ingomar Packing, and the list has continued to grow as the group works to make this a festival that will really honor what tomatoes mean to the local economy and culture.



This two day event will be held October 8th and 9th and will feature ce-

lebrity chefs, Ryan Scott from Top Chef and Lou Petrozzo from Hell’s Kitchen. There will also be cooking demonstrations throughout both days where Executive Chefs from several companies show how tomatoes are used in various ethnic cooking. There will also be Pedal Tractor Pulls for kids 2-12 years of age, a Pinewood Derby, entertainment, crafts for the kids, games and great vendors.

Rhonda, who has been involved with promoting agri-tourism throughout the County, started the Tourism committee with the Los Banos Chamber of Commerce in 2009 in an effort to find ways to bring in outside tourism dollars into a very flat economy. The committee spent some time looking at what was already available in the area that could attract tourists and

most of it centered around agriculture. Reviving the Tomato Festival was the first “big idea” and others such as creating a Visitors Guide and a Blossom Trail soon followed.

“Our County has so much to offer in the way of tourism,” she said “and there is incredible potential for all of us if we join together to make Merced County a destination for people from the surrounding larger cities and show them how important agriculture is in a fun and entertaining way.”

For more information on the Tomato Festival check out their website at www.losbanos.com.



Countryside Art

When driving in the country you never quite know what you’re going to see.. But a bust on the bridge over a canal saying “Pay the Toll or Meet the Troll?” Or

part of one Livingston farm boy's imagination.

Joseph Alvernaz has been building in sand for years. Currently his backyard holds a sleeping dragon, the ruins of a cathedral, a troll, a man-at-arms and his current project a crouching cougar. Neighbors have been known to bring visitors by to see the wonders of soil and water.

But impressive as these sculptures are some would tell you these are

nothing compared to his 7 ft. Minas Tirith, (a city

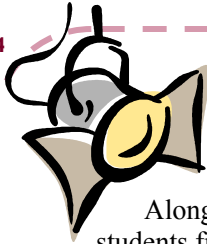
in Lord of the Rings) that stood for two years.

As the sands shift, so do his creations.



mountain lion about to pounce on your car in the Central Valley? Not your everyday dirt road sightings. These surprises are only





Palo Alto

By Ashley Reese, grade 12, Palo Alto High

"When I was on the Koch farm, I saw firsthand the notion of sustainability in the almond orchard."

Along with a group of students from Palo Alto High School, I was able to leave the high-tech atmosphere of Silicon Valley and travel to the Magneson and Koch farm to learn about where our food comes from. In the days preceding the farm visit, Mrs. Hori, a Biology teacher and group leader of the high school sponsored trip, showed the documentary "Food Inc." in class.

Watching the documentary and then visiting the Koch and Magneson was like witnessing two extremes of the food industry. In Food Inc. I was exposed to graphic scenes of animals and was shocked to hear about the some of the farmers' woes with lawsuits and loss of land due to unchecked corporations. Chickens, pigs, and cattle were treated in a mechanical, efficient way from birth to execution. Oftentimes, the livestock never saw the sun or blue skies from inside the factory walls. I kept thinking to myself, "is this what I'm really eating?"

When I was on the Koch farm, I saw firsthand the notion of sustainability in the almond orchard. The chickens were able to eat the grass and bugs in between the almond trees, and in return fertilize the trees with their poop. Furthermore, the eggs produced from the chickens in the orchard had a bright orange yolk, and were astonishingly healthier than cage-free or free-range chicken eggs. Mr. Koch patiently explained to our group the

difference between cage-free and free-range; I thought free-range was the same thing as pasture-fed!

Although I was unable to visit the Magneson farm on this past trip, several students shared their

cluding farmland and water rights issues.

Lastly, we were exposed to the issues facing bee colonies and pollination. I was unaware of the enormous impact bees had on plants and trees, and the consequences of letting the bee colonies collapse. I definitely took for granted the role of bees in the natural world and the precarious environment we have created for them.

On the bus ride home, I had a chance to reflect on my experiences at the farm. I learned a great deal

positive experiences with me. It was informative to hear about the entire process of organic milk production, and the differences in the grains and living conditions of cows on organic farms. Oftentimes we take for granted what it means to be "organic", especially when the label doesn't refer to fruits or vegetables. However, organic milk tastes better if nothing else, and the purchase supports a more sustainable and healthy farm.

In addition to visiting the almond orchard and the calves, Cindy Lashbrook and Jean Okuye explained the role the Valley Land Alliance plays among independent farmers and ranchers in Merced County. With the recent push for housing and corporate developments in the past decade, the Valley Land Alliance has taken on the responsibility of protecting the interests of the landowners, in-

about sustainability in farming, the difference between cage-free, free-range, and pasture fed chickens, the Valley Land Alliance, and the bee colony collapse disorder. Since visiting the Koch and Magneson farm we have become much smarter grocery shoppers and more informed about issues involving the food industry. The documentary, "Food Inc.", and the visit to Merced county with Palo Alto High School students, has left me more informed about food production and given me greater initiative to eat nutritiously and buy local food.



Valley Land Alliance In Action



Since our Winter 2010 newsletter we have been active in not only continuing projects such as the Green Tour but also in new projects such as the development of a Merced County fun map. Education is our mission.

We continue to educate people of the importance of saving our precious farmland. Although the Measure C on the November 2010 ballot did not pass, **63% of the voters** favored Measure D, a County ballot measure presented at the same time, which was similar to Measure C but excluded several unincorporated communities. Measure D would have allowed the voters in Merced County to participate in decisions when zoning was up for change, specifically taking ag zoned land and changing it to zoning for houses. The 63% voters for D may have not realized that the County measure hinged on the passing of Measure C. Very confusing to many we believe. From this strong support for D a message is loud and clear. **The voters clearly want to save farmland and so do we.**

We continue to speak at county supervisors' and city council meetings. The County and Merced City general plan updates have had input from the people. VLA has been at the table all five years the County has been working on its general plan update. We take advantage every place we can to promote saving farmland, even while standing in line at the grocery store.

Our booth at the

County Fair this year followed the theme, Saddle Up For Fun. We compared farming now with farming one hundred years ago, showing horsepower changes. Many people of all ages stopped by our booth where we handed out fact sheets about ag, water and land issues which threaten jobs and our quality of life. Did you know that 35% of the jobs in Merced County are connected with ag?

Also at our booth we had a map, hot off the press, showing off our county.

Ten thousand copies of this FREE fun map have been handed out to entice people to make Merced County a destination and also to encourage people who live in Merced County to take a closer look in their backyard. Stop by the California Welcome Center in Merced or Los Banos Chamber of Commerce to pick up your free map.

Country Ventures (CV) was started just two years ago by VLA. Accomplishments include one audio tour of Hwy 140 from Merced to Mariposa. This was made possible with the generous donation by California Women for Ag and the work of a committee including Farm Advisor Maxwell Norton, farmer Rose Marie

Burroughs, Tim Whitfield and Stephanie Marchini. The audio tour and map are available from the website, www.countryventures.org. A second audio tour, for Hwy 165 from Turlock to Los Banos, will be completed soon, with the continued support of California Women for Ag, Maxwell Norton and others.

VLA was a sponsor for a workshop "Growing Agritourism" where 93 people attended from six counties. Thanks to UC Cooperative Extension for organizing this and hosting the all day event. We also sponsored three other events: the January Planning and Conservation League symposium in Sacramento, Heartland Festival at Azevedos' in May and the June U Pick and Gather

event in Livingston. All four events were educational.

Another project VLA has participated in is the annual event which brings about 100 Palo Alto students for a day on the Magneson and Koch farms in Merced County. This year most of the students at the Magneson Dairy watched while a calf was born.

The 2nd annual Green Tour was held in April which was attended by about 60 people. Next year VLA hopes to make this event larger with fewer places to visit but arranging to have booths for education to help us all

live better and more economically. Education of how to save our resources such as water, energy and land to grow our crops is critical we believe.

Please consider helping us with your time, talent and financial support. Together we will make a difference.



Web Doctor



We are pleased to announce that our web-master, Ross

Avilla, recently received his doctorate in psychology from UC Davis. Ross has patiently stayed with us, updating our web site daily, as he pursued this degree. He has worked as a teaching assistant, taken classes, written a dissertation, commuted from Turlock to Davis

and now teaches at UC Merced, all while tending to our VLA web site needs. Ross, we thank you.

Visit our web site at: valleylandalliance.org to read updated news and lots of other great educational information.

[http://
www.valleylandalliance.org](http://www.valleylandalliance.org)

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:

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P.O. Box 102

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Or pay by credit card online at: <http://www.valleylandalliance.org>