

VALLEY LAND ALLIANCE

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



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FALL 2009

Splitting the Farm

By Jeff Freitas

According to a study published in 2000 by American Farmland Trust, “a ranchette parcel removes more land from agriculture than any single higher density suburban dwelling.” Merced County was shown to have 1,956 parcels of ranchettes, totaling 7,538 acres of “would-be” farmland. The study also showed that ranchettes provide Merced County significantly higher property tax revenues than agriculture. In the Northern San Joaquin Valley (consisting of San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties) the average tax revenue was \$283 for developed parcels, but only \$99 for undevel-

oped parcels.

In 2007, this led the Valley Land Alliance Board to ask the following questions:

What is the impact of ranchette development on Merced County farmers and our natural resources?

Is there a built-in tax revenue incentive for Merced County to bypass environmental review, and expedite approval of development on agricultural land? How can growth be addressed democratically, for the food security of the 98% non-farming population?

To work towards answers to some of these questions, VLA sought to collect information on

Minor Subdivision approvals, to document the increase in potential for future development on agricultural land. A “Minor Subdivision” is an administrative approval process that allows an owner to split a parcel into 2-6

smaller parcels, all of which can have up to 4 homes constructed on them (actual conditions vary by county). In December 2007, VLA filed a public records request to collect information on Minor Subdivisions from Merced County. Their reply: “*The response to your request therefore is that the documents you request do not exist.*” However, the fight was not given up – throughout 2008, additional pressure was brought on the county by VLA and other groups of the community.

Fast-forward to February 2009. Valley Land Alliance submitted a new public records request, but this time – *the documents existed*. We were allowed the opportunity to view all minor subdivisions zoned agricultural between 1998-2008, with one catch: we could only view the files for 2 hours per week, while two staff people keep a watchful eye to make sure nothing is stolen from the files.

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Valley Land Alliance in Action

May:

- May 1-2 culmination of much work organizing sister high schools: Palo Alto and Livingston. Huge success. See article by Kisha McGuire.
- Continued looking at agricul-

tural zoned minor subdivision files at Merced County Planning Dept., although given only 15 files and one 2 hour slot of time to peruse/week. See article by Jeff Freitas, commented on applications for minor subdivision lot splits in

Merced County almost weekly

- Continued participating in California Endowment Grant application to support land use designing to protect ag land.

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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

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President's Message



President Jean Okuye

Hearing the Sandhill Cranes overhead tells me a change is coming, bringing 25,000 Snow and Ross Geese plus many other birds here for the winter. My registration will be one of about 400 registrations for the 13th Annual Central Valley Birding Symposium in Stockton. Groups will disperse throughout the Valley looking for birds. This is one way to get out to explore our wonderful open space.



Truly, this Valley must be treasured. This means our natural resources: land, water, and air must be protected. If we don't protect these resources, the people living here will suffer.

financially, in kind and in the way you live.

"We don't inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children" Ancient Proverb

Please join me and VLA in standing up for our quality of life with air healthy to breathe, land preserved for our food and wildlife, and our water clean and plentiful. We can not continue the path we are on if we want a quality of life in our Valley..

We welcome your support,



Congratulations elected officials. We look forward to working with you. Working together is success.

Special Thanks

Many thanks to the Community Foundation of Merced County for providing a grant to support VLA work in education to protect farmland. VLA is grateful for a grant from the Northern California Environ-



mental Grassroots Fund. This fund is a semi-autonomous organization housed with the Rose Foundation. The Fund's mission is to bridge a significant gap between grassroots environmental groups and the traditional funding patterns of organized philanthropy.

The John and Nancy Cassidy Family Foundation have graciously donated to

VLA several times. This foundation is an advised fund of Silicon Valley Community Foundation. We are grateful for their trust in VLA and continued support.

Without the support of many, including our members, we would not be able to influence so many people. Thank you all for your support.

The Spotlight

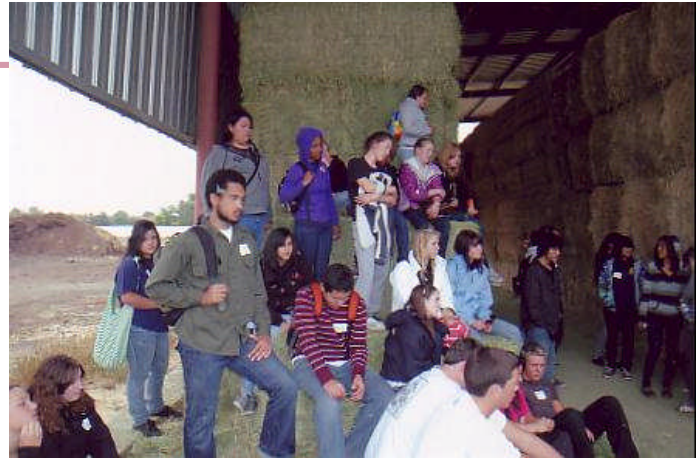
Welcome to the spotlight, where we take the light off ourselves and let it shine on members of the community. We want to know what other people are thinking.

Paly Living

By Kisha McGuire Sophomore at Livingston High School

On May 1-2, 2009, two groups of students from Livingston High School and Palo Alto High School came together and enjoyed a jammed packed weekend of fun activities, valuable information, and memorable moments. The weekend began with a get together held at Charlie and Sally Magnesons' house. The students introduced each other by playing a mixer where each person wrote information on himself or herself on an index card and then the students had to go around and find who matched the index card. After a few games of baseball and lunch, everyone went to Scott and

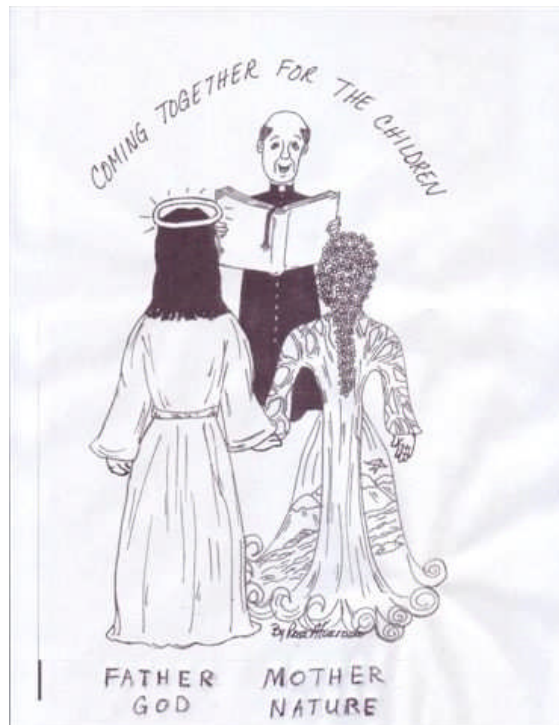
Pam Magnesons' dairy, where we learned all about cows and dairy life. As the sun started setting, it was time to set up camp for the Paly kids, but we were hit with an unexpected downpour and had to change plans. Instead of dinner at the campgrounds, we ate pizza at Geno's in Livingston. It was a great chance for the kids to warm up more, get to know each other better, and enjoy great pizza. The evening did not stop there.

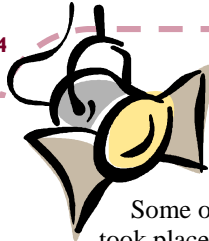


Charlie and Sally graciously opened up there home for us to hold the night's activites and have the Pally kids sleep overnight.

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Isn't this the Time that God, the Father and Mother Nature Get Married?





Paly Living *continued from page 3*

“As Livingston said their goodnights to Paly kids that night, they did not feel like strangers anymore but like friends.”

Some of the events that took place were a speech by the Mayor of Livingston, Daniel Varela, and charades played by Livingston and Paly together. As Livingston said their goodnights to Paly kids that night, they did not feel like strangers anymore but like friends.

The next day started and we were ready to go! The day started at Merced’s Food Bank where Nathan Mininger gave us a tour of the building. Then it was off to UC Merced where we were given a tour of the campus by two tour guides. Following that, we went to the Nicholas Calf Ranch, owned by Rochelle and Peter Koch. We were given a tour of the ranch and then we enjoyed a delicious lunch that included an incredible taco salad and cookies. During lunch, we learned about Japanese American internment from survivor Tom Nakashima. After lunch we went out to where the Kochs’ kept their chickens and discovered how they used the chickens to help grow and maintain their fields. As we moved along, we went to a bee session held by Bill Thompson and discovered the importance of bees. When the session was over, we all came back to the lunch area and reflected on how the weekend went and how we could continue this relationship

between the two schools. We came up with the group name Paly Living and said our goodbyes. It was a great weekend and will be a memory for a lifetime. We are already planning on getting Paly Living together again on October 17, 2009.

About two months later in late July, Livingston High School Key Club teamed up with Valley Land Alliance during the Merced County Fair. There Jean Okuye, Rochelle Koch and John Meyer put up a booth and key clubbers came and helped. We had a Plinko board and were able to educate the public about agriculture and allow them to take a piece of it home by giving out seeds as prizes. Key clubbers stayed for most of the night and it was a great success! We hope that next year the Key Club can be more involved by helping set up the display where the booth was held. Overall, it was a great experience this summer and we could not have done it without the countless number of people who made it all possible. We would like to thank them and want to let them know that the Livingston High School Key Club was proud to be a part of it.



Editor notes: Kisha is a student at Livingston High School active in Future Farmers of America (FFA) and the Kiwanis Key Club which has about 100 members. She also is a member of the PalyLiving Sister High School group. PalyLiving grew out of a 5 year annual trek of Palo Alto students to the Magneson dairy in Ballico. About 100 students have come for a one day event the past five years to learn about farming, milk production, water and land issues, and sustainable farming. VLA has taken part in this education. The Paly Living group, with about 15 students from each school, plan to meet this winter in Palo Alto for two days. They just recently gleaned 6,000 pounds of sweet potatoes for the food bank with about 20 students participating from the two high schools.



Survey Shows: California Farmers Profit for Agritourism

By Brenda Dawson and Penny Leff

California farmers and ranchers hosted more than 2.4 million agricultural tourists in 2008, according to early results from California's first statewide economic survey of agritourism operators. The survey's preliminary findings suggest agritourism can indeed be a profitable supplement to a farm or ranch business. Agricultural tourism allows travelers a chance to visit working farms and ranches and can include experiences such as picking their own fruit, visiting a petting zoo, touring a vineyard, buying fresh produce or riding horses. Small farms made up more than two-thirds of the farms that reported offering agritourism.

"We are excited to find that agritourism really seems to work for a lot of small farms," said Penny Leff, statewide agritour-

ism coordinator for the UC Small Farm Program. "Our results also show that agritourism is primarily local. More than 85 percent of reported visitors were from California."

Most agritourism operators who responded to the survey reported their agritourism business generated some profit. A majority said they are planning to expand or diversify their agritourism offerings over the next five years. In addition, 22 percent of agritourism operators reported more than \$100,000 in agritourism receipts for 2008.

The survey was conducted by a group of researchers from UC Cooperative Extension and the UC Small Farm Program, with funding from the California Communities Program. Researchers first mailed questionnaires in January to nearly 2,000 potential agritourism operators

in every California county.

Of the 554 responses to the survey, 332 respondents said they currently offer agritourism activities on their farms or ranches. Further analysis will help measure the impacts of agritourism ventures on local economies. The survey will also help researchers identify major challenges faced by agritourism business owners, so that future UC work can better address those needs.

Editors Note: Valley Land Alliance has spearheaded an Agritourism Committee which attempts to bring visitors to educate them of the value of our agriculture based economy and at same time help Merced's economy. The meetings have been well attended and the interest is high. We will keep you posted on our progress.

"The Survey's preliminary findings suggest agritourism can indeed be a profitable supplement to a farm or ranch business."

Action *continued from page 1*



- Attended Rose Foundation training: Finding Grant Fund-raiser
 - Attended US-Green Building-Council meeting
 - Attended Great Valley Center conference in Sacramento
 - Participated in U-Pick and Gather educational day in Livingston.
 - Continued weekly 2 hour viewing of files.
- June:**
- Continued research, attending meetings to support sustainable land use planning
 - Began planning for Merced County Fair booth
 - Continued weekly 2 hour viewing of files
- July:**

- Fair booth: see picture and article Continued weekly 2 hour viewing of files
 - Participated in Cal Endow Grant planning
- August:**
- Co-Sponsored Ag/Art/Nature Tourism committee with Merced County Farm Bureau: 40 attended
 - Attended meetings on Livingston Community Garden development
 - Participated in Cal Endow Grant planning
 - Met with author of new book regarding land use issues
 - Attended Valley Future Forum in Modesto
- September:**
- Continued research
 - Participated in Cal Endow Grant planning
 - Planned Ag Tourism meeting

- Began planning with UCM an educational tour of green homes/zeroscaping
 - Visited Mariposa Farm Tour event
- October:**
- Planned gleaning of sweet potatoes PalyLiving High School project
 - Continued research
 - Attended Cal Endow Grant planning
 - Attended city and county council and supervisors' meetings
 - Attended Rose Foundation event in Sacramento
 - Attended Sustainable Tourism conference, Monterey
 - 2nd Ag/Art/Nature Tourism meeting
 - With help of 20 students, PalyLiving Sister Hi School, and adults, gleaned 6,000# plus sweet potatoes for Food Bank.
 - Daily updated website. Thanks to Robby Avilla and Ross Avilla.

Farm *continued from page 1*

We believe this is the first time ever, Merced County had developed a written procedure for viewing public files – but it limited the viewing of public files.

The Public Records Act explicitly



states “Public records are open to inspection at all times during the office hours of the state or local agency” and “The guidelines and regulations adopted pursuant to this section shall not operate to limit the hours public records are open for inspection.”

So we decided to call other counties, to see if the limitations were excessive. Of the 30 counties that responded to our inquiry, 28 responded that there was no time limitation to viewing public records. Furthermore, most counties require little to no oversight by paid staff.

Fast-forward again, now to October 2009. We are continuing to observe files and build a database of information regarding Minor Subdivisions. We are also working with the county to expand their public records process within the Planning Department. We have a pending request for electronic data in an effort to speed up the process.

Stay tuned: and we’ll keep you posted on our progress.

<http://www.valleylandalliance.org>

Valley Land Alliance

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