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The Farm Report: Small farmers adapt to compete

The Farm Report

By Tom Powers and Kathryn Lyddan
Contra Costa Times correspondents

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For the next several months, we'll be running a monthly column from the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust about our farming and ranching families and businesses in the East Bay.

Contra Costa farms provide us with a remarkable diversity of fresh, local fruits and vegetables, as well as jobs, open space and a sense of place and seasons. When we "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" we purchase fresh, nutritious food, reduce the carbon footprint of our food and keeps our food dollars in our economy.

With 12,000 acres of productive farmland in the Brentwood region east of Mount Diablo, Contra Costa County has a remarkable potential to build a local food system that will benefit all of our citizens.

And yet, despite the many benefits of local food, government policies often thwart rather than encourage local farming. While county zoning currently protects the farmland of the Brentwood region, many local government policies have made it difficult for local farmers to make a living farming. In the past couple of years, those policies have been changing.

Value added

When the county created the County Agricultural

Core in 1990, its primary goal was to protect prime farmland east and south of Brentwood from development. To protect the rich soil, the county zoning prohibited subdivisions smaller than 40 acres and restricted the land use to farming.

As agriculture has changed over the past 20 years, small-scale farmers have had to adapt their marketing strategies to compete. Innovative farmers near urban markets in the Bay Area have found ways to connect with their urban neighbors through farmers markets, roadside stands and farm visits.

Other small-scale farmers have created a successful niche, adding value to their bounty by processing it into wines, olive oils, jams, salsas and baked goods. Frog Hollow Farms is a wonderful example of a Brentwood organic farm that sells premier fruit through farmers markets, and "adds value" to their harvest by making jams, jellies, chutneys and pastries.

While the county's agricultural zoning was well-intentioned, until recently the roadside stands allowed in the County Agricultural Core were so limited that farmers were unable to take advantage of direct marketing and agricultural tourism opportunities.

In 2004, the County revised the agricultural zoning to allow farmers to build wineries, tasting rooms and olive oil processing facilities. Further changes were required in local government policies to reduce road fees to accurately reflect the limited traffic created by agricultural processing, and to make these facilities economically feasible.

In 2007, the county's general plan was amended further to allow farmer to make jams, jellies, salsa and other "value added" products from their harvests. The amendment also allowed farmers to operate larger roadside stands so that we can

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purchase the harvest directly at local farms.

Celebrating local farms

Last year, Contra Costa County and cities began to celebrate local farming by declaring June "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" month. This month, the County Board of Supervisors heard a report about the work that county staff and local nonprofit groups such as the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust have done in the past year to support and promote local farming.

Local governments have enormous food purchasing power through their hospitals, schools and correctional facilities. It makes sense to support our local farmers with the public dollars spent on food.

The county Medical Center is working closely with its produce distributor, Bay Cities Produce, to buy fruits and vegetables from local farmers. This year, Bay Cities Produce has created a special Brentwood vegetable mix for local hospitals and other institutional purchasers.

In the past year, supervisors John Gioia of Richmond and Mary Piepho of Brentwood have worked closely with local nonprofits to develop an innovative program that provides Richmond families with healthy, nutritious fruits and vegetables direct from local farms. A seasonal variety of fruits and vegetables are delivered from Brentwood farms to Eco Village Farm in Richmond.

Together with produce grown at Eco Village Farm, the local harvest is assembled into produce boxes that are distributed twice a month at Martin Luther King Community Center in Richmond.

Eco Village Farm will deliver a fresh produce box to any location in Richmond if at least 10 people sign up for the service. You can find out more or set up a produce box program by calling the Richmond

Children's Foundation at 510 236 8339 or e-mail lbobo@richmondchildren.org .

Economic climate

In today's financial climate, as the county is forced to cut essential services, it is important to note that creating farmer-friendly zoning, purchasing local food for county institutions and connecting our farms to urban neighbors does not require any significant investment of county funds.

The accomplishments described above are the result of a dynamic partnership between the county, local nonprofits and private sector partners.

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