

# Larger stands spell relief for farmers

- Supervisors pass ordinance that gives East Contra Costa growers more ways to sell their products

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East Contra Costa farmers soon will be able to operate larger roadside stands as well as farm markets, giving them more opportunities to sell their fruits and vegetables.

The county board of supervisors this week passed a law meant to help put more money in the pockets of East County farmers.

The new ordinance, which will go into effect July 5, will allow farmers to operate larger roadside stands as well as commercial kitchens, where they can process fruits to make jams and jellies.

Growers will be able to sell a wider variety of produce and non-agricultural products, such as soda and bottled water at their roadside stands. The ordinance also allows farmers to host temporary events on their property.

Supervisors said they acknowledge that farmers are faced with economic struggles.

The hope is that the new ordinance will better position growers to prosper, said Supervisor Mary Piepho, who represents portions of East County.

"I realize this effort is about sustainability and vitality for the farming community," Piepho said.

It's a huge victory for East County farmers, many who say they are struggling to survive in an era when growers are receiving less of the food dollar and development is swallowing rich farmland.

"I can't tell you how relieved I am," said Meredith Nunn, a local fruit farmer. "This means I have a future."

Nunn, who has been farming in East County for more than 20 years, was prepared to close down her fruit orchard and move to a neighboring county where there were fewer restrictions for farmers.

Now, Nunn says the ordinance will give her a better opportunity to make money farming in East County. She will be able to use her commercial kitchen to make jams and pies to sell at her stand, Nunn said.

"I can go ahead and get that equipment out of storage and pull out my dusty recipe books," Nunn said.

Currently, farmers cannot operate stands larger than 400 square feet, nor can they sell anything other than the raw produce grown on their farms.

Under the new ordinance, farmers can operate markets as large as 3,500 square feet.

"I'm very happy with what has come from the ordinance. It will benefit farming in East County," said Ken Hagan, a local fruit farmer. "It will be something that has a future to it. I definitely support it."

East County farmers have pushed for the county to lift restrictions within the its 12,000-acre agricultural core and allow farmers to operate wineries, farm markets, commercial kitchens and other moneymaking businesses.

In Contra Costa, a region dominated by small family farms, growers pump nearly \$300 million annually into the local economy, according to agricultural studies. Yet the average income per farm in Contra Costa County was \$42,000 in 2002, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Local farmers are struggling to survive economically, primarily because of the consolidation of the state's agricultural industry and the globalization of food production, according to the report.

Development has already pushed many growers out of Contra Costa County, where the number of farms has declined by about 30 percent in the past two decades, according to a 2007 Contra Costa County/Brentwood Agricultural Marketing study.

"While rich in tradition, agriculture is a struggle, and (farmers) are constantly dealing with everyday survival," said Patrick Roche, a county planner.

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