

## Farmland Working Group

*Striving to protect food, families & farmland. Since 1999.*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SOIL

On February 26, 1937, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt drafted a five-paragraph letter asking state governors to support uniform soil conservation. The closing line of his first paragraph: **"The Nation that destroys its soil destroys itself."**

A healthy soil is a living, dynamic ecosystem. In addition to the plants and bugs easily seen in a pristine rural landscape, worms and microscopic organisms beneath the soil's surface perform ongoing life-support functions.

This natural resource, often taken for granted by our consumption-driven, fast-moving society, supports 95 percent of all global food production (Food and Agricultural Organization). Equally critical, soil provides ecosystem services that are fundamental to almost everything we need in order to survive and thrive.

Working full-time, soil:

- Continually builds and replenishes the support structure that holds up human civilization's infrastructure;
- Provides habitat for billions of organisms, including plants, wildlife, pollinators, and the 10,000 pounds of underground biological life in every acre;
- Breaks down minerals as well as dead and decaying materials so they can be transformed into plant nutrients;
- Shuttles the recycled, transformed nutrients to a plant's feeding trough, called its rhizosphere, where those nutrients become available to roots;
- Supports synergistic activities that suppress plant disease, insect and weed pests;
- Conserves soil moisture and warehouses nutrients for release during busy commercial crop or home garden production months;
- Harbors many of the antibiotics we use to fight disease;
- Filters our drinking water;
- Serves as a stable storage container, buffering us from contaminants until they can be remediated; and
- Protects delicate plant roots from abrupt temperature changes.



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**Our Mission:** To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.

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# William Seifert – 2019 Scholarship Recipient

## Buhach Colony High School, Atwater

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The preservation of agricultural lands should be of utmost importance to us. The agricultural preservation plan is to strictly limit urban growth into agricultural lands in order to preserve orchards, crops, livestock fields, irrigation sources, and so on. Other objectives are to promote the efficient use of government services and encourage formation of other local agencies.

Sometimes societies make decisions based on short-term goals, but fail to consider long-term impacts

those decisions may have on the community or even the very survival of the society itself. I feel that this is sometimes the case with urban growth. I have often noticed publicity or community leaders from various Valley towns talking excitedly about being an up-and-coming city, or about the wonderful growth coming to the area. It is easy to become enthusiastic about changes when someone continually points out that we will be able to enjoy a new school, additional shopping outlets, or an array of new restaurants. But what are those restaurants going to serve when our prime ag production land has been lost to subdivisions and chain stores? Or at what cost?

As our population grows, it becomes more important—not less—that we preserve the land which will ultimately feed our increasing numbers. California, home to some of our nation's most important ag land, and also to a great portion of the American population, must master balance.

Water is a key topic to any discussion of growth and preservation of productive ag lands. Does California even have enough water to sustain ever-increasing population growth? Certainly not if we don't resolve the problem of inadequate storage facilities for the water we do have, and if we don't push back against policy that allows this most precious resource to flow unused to the ocean.

In recent years I think we've seen evidence that in the San Joaquin Valley we are probably close to the maximum population that can even be sustained in this arid part of the state. We have seen entire communities literally run out of drinking water, and in my own neighborhood nearly every home needed a new well within a couple of years.

It is not realistic to think that our communities won't grow. So we as a society must be careful in our planning. We must elect public officials who will be smart with our expansion and who will understand that they cannot simply pander to the parts of the state which are home to the greatest number of voters. Local agencies may be key in self-advocating for preservation of their lands and agricultural base, and government services need to understand the importance of protecting this important land and use common sense in the creating and implementing policy.

Education and talking openly about this issue is so important if we want to sustain our ag lands and very way of life. We need to educate our youth on the importance of agriculture, including youth that live in urban areas. Ignorance makes it far more likely that our lesser-populated rural areas will be overrun because we have less of a legislative voice.

Much as public education initiatives have successfully garnered support for protection of endangered species, those same kinds of educational programs can teach a child living in the middle of Los Angeles that the ag lands of the Great San Joaquin Valley are his bread basket too. We share this challenge and should come together in search of common-sense solutions.

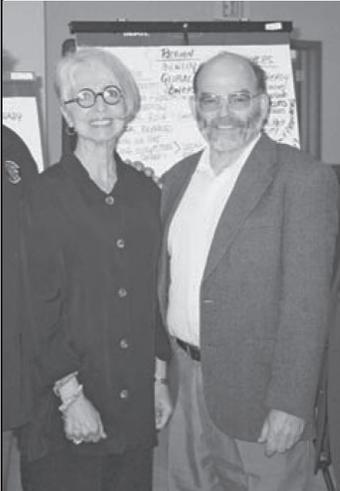
by William Seifert

### **Without farmland and ranchland, we lose:**

- The ability to grow food, fuel, and fiber in the United States
  - Biodiversity and much of our wildlife habitat
  - Soil and plants that draw down carbon, countering climate change
  - Clean air, water, and healthy soil
  - An economic industry that provides 11% of total U.S. employment
  - Scenic landscapes that make America bountiful and beautiful
-



# WE'VE *been* WATCHING... OVER 20 YEARS!



## Reliving two decades of Farmland Working Group's fight against sprawl

The Modesto Bee  
August 29, 2019

Farmland Working Group has been a consistent, persistent advocate for protecting our best farmland for over 20 years.

In 1999, FWG made its first video, "A Vision and a Legacy," capturing the essence of what makes the Central Valley of California an agricultural powerhouse. FWG newsletters, going back to the beginning of this century, chronicle the depth and breadth of our commitment. Each issue tells the stories of people committed to the land, taking steps to stop sprawl over our best soils.

In 2007 we questioned the logic of the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors adopting the Salida Now initiative rather than sending it to a public vote. Our "Salida How?" headline challenged adding thousands of acres of urbanization in an unincorporated area without the structure and means to pay its own way for urban services.

In 2008, the public came out and voted for the Stamp Out Sprawl initiative with a super majority; the law of the land became "no more residential development outside of cities within Stanislaus County." We celebrated this landmark vote with our spring issue proclaiming "E Changes Everything!" And, so it did! For nearly 12 years, no new housing subdivisions have sprouted up over our best county lands.

2009 was our 10-year anniversary and we wrote about not allowing urban use in the ag buffer north of Turlock. We highlighted the need for "Rethinking the North County Corridor." The subsequent public outcry to "make Kiernan work" became reality and Kiernan Road continues to be the main four-lane divided corridor on the east side of the county.

In 2010, we encouraged Turlock to "hold the line" along their west side, and documented the courts upholding the Stanislaus County Farmland Mitigation Program when challenged by the building industry.

Residential urban limits were introduced to the public and proposed to the Modesto City Council in 2012. As an outgrowth, mayors of Stanislaus cities asked for collaboration between development attorney George Petrulakis and us to address the concept of agricultural investment zones. Today, this plan is dormant but may produce some future innovations.

2014 began with "No Annexation of Wood Colony" and ended with Stamp Out Sprawl urban limits qualified for the ballot in Modesto. Unfortunately, in November 2015, less than 25% of registered voters cast ballots and Measure I was defeated by 215 votes. 2016 and 2017 brought an ever-present concern about water and what state mandates may do to the future of agriculture.

In 2018, the Central Valley Farmland Trust merged with the Brentwood Farmland Trust of Contra Costa



County, becoming California Farmland Trust. This is very dear to us; both of us served on the county committee that explored the feasibility of forming a farmland trust.

And now, in 2019 and beyond, our focus remains true to our mission: To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.

– by Denny Jackman and Jeani Ferrari  
Founding Members of Farmland Working Group



## Message from the Chair

**Lori Wolf**

Since 2014, when Modesto began updating its General Plan, much has happened in and around Wood Colony. Residents of Wood Colony resoundingly voiced the desire to remain rural and undeveloped. We all knew about our unsurpassed farmland, however, it became an educational opportunity to delve into the truly unique qualities of this agricultural region. Alan and Linda Cover made presentations to a variety of local groups, addressing the uniqueness of the junctures of mountains, rivers, floodplains and subsurface water formations that created this magnificent, bountiful basin. It was truly enlightening for me.

Fast forward to today, 2019. It is more important than ever to protect farmland in the Central Valley. Every city in our county is surrounded by this rich, productive and non-renewable farmland. Now is the time for the cities to create policies to protect this valuable resource as never before. The City of Modesto could lead the way.

Stanislaus County has an ag mitigation policy adopted in 2007 that has yet to be tested due to the nation's 2008 economic downturn. This ag mitigation policy applies to residential development in the county, not industrial. We will be watching to see how this plays out going forward.

Alarming articles are being printed about the lack of affordable housing

throughout Northern California. This will be a call to action for this county to choose between feeding the nation, and beyond, or housing the workers from the Bay Area and beyond. Food production and processing is where the county's stable and steady jobs will continue to come from -- the tools, supplies and fertilizers to plant and grow the crops, the mechanization required for harvesting and processing the crops, the marketing, sales and distribution of those crops -- every acre that is lost going forward negatively affects all of those jobs.

We look to you, our elected leaders, to get this right. We look to LAFCO to fulfill its California-ordered mandate to protect our farmland. The City of Modesto could add an agricultural preservation element as part of its General Plan Update. Are city officials willing to make the changes needed to do so?

Many City and County representatives attended the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Workshop held in Modesto, June 3. Will they use the information and available funding to work on agricultural land conservation? There are amazing grant opportunities available to help them do so. Stanislaus County and its cities should make this a priority as never before.

And lastly, every resident of this county needs to become a clamorous voice, asking for our dedicated public leaders to show the rest of the world how it can become a reality.

### **FWG Executive Board**

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*In memory of*

**Max Dahlgren  
Justin Ferrari**

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Dahlgren*



As important, healthy soils mitigate climate change by efficiently storing carbon and stifling greenhouse gas emissions.

By 2060, our soils must sustain an estimated 9.8 billion people (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs). Yet during the last 150 years, we've lost half of the basic building block that makes soil productive. The costs of soil loss and degradation in the United States alone are now estimated to be as high as \$85 billion every single year.

Clearly, it's time to focus on soil.

Soil health management systems are individualized farm and ranch plans designed to promote and enhance agro-ecosystem practices that are socially, ecologically and economically sustainable.

"Soil health is defined as the continued capacity of soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals and humans," Cristine Morgan, Ph.D., Chief Scientific Officer of the Soil Health Institute (SHI), explained. "Soil health management systems are critical in order to protect our soils and maintain the capacity to produce enough agricultural and forestry products to feed, clothe, and shelter a growing population."

"Our challenges to feed and clothe 9.8 billion people by 2050 are compounded by our expanding population's competition for land and water resources," Wayne Honeycutt, Ph.D., president and CEO of SHI, added. "We're undoubtedly going to be asked to produce more on less land. Our food security and our global sustainability hinges on the ability to protect and enhance the soils that are already under production today. That's where soil health management comes in."

A number of farming and livestock grazing approaches promote the sustainable management of soils while continuing to maintain productivity, Honeycutt said. In addition, lawn and garden systems can be adjusted to promote soil health using the same principles.

"Soil health management systems promote the links between life in the soil and ecosystem function. They help us capture the benefits of high functioning soils," Honeycutt said. Systems aren't restricted to any

single production system – there's room for improving soil health in any operation, including conventional agricultural production. It's merely a matter of reducing soil disturbance when reasonable, enhancing species diversity, keeping living roots in the soil throughout the year, and maintaining a healthy quantity of decomposing surface residue.

"Soil provides the basis for everything we do," Honeycutt concluded. "As Hugh Hammond Bennett, considered the father of modern soil conversation, once said, 'Out of the long list of nature's gifts..., none is perhaps so utterly essential to human life as soil.'

Soil is vital to life, and society has rightly renewed its commitment to protect and enhance soil - not only for ourselves but for future generations."

If you want to learn more about soil health and/or become involved in the growing soil health movement, visit [www.soilhealthinstitute.org](http://www.soilhealthinstitute.org).

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**SOIL HEALTH**  
— INSTITUTE —

#### About the Soil Health Institute

The Soil Health Institute ([www.soilhealthinstitute.org](http://www.soilhealthinstitute.org)) is a non-profit whose mission is to safeguard and enhance the vitality and productivity of soil through scientific research and advancement. The Institute works with its many stakeholders to identify gaps in research and adoption; develop strategies, networks and funding to address those gaps; and ensure beneficial impact of those investments to agriculture, the environment and society.



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# Farmland Working Group

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



**OUR 20<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY!**

**... looking back in 50 years, our grandchildren will undoubtedly point to local farmland protection as one of the most significant achievements of our generation if we are able to save the most productive agricultural region in the world.**

**– Tim Byrd**