

Farmland Working Group

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

TIME TO PUT A HOLD ON NEW AG WELLS IN FOOTHILLS



Valley Citizens Unite Against Mining Water

It's only fitting that some of the speakers during Tuesday's public comment portion of the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors meeting had names like "Smith" and "Jones." It was one of those rare moments when ordinary citizens speak

in unison and form a truly "public" opinion.

The keynote was sounded by John Booker, a retired architect from Oakdale, who represented over one-hundred members of the Stanislaus Water Coalition: "It is almost impossible to drive one mile in the eastern part of Stanislaus County today without seeing a newly planted orchard, or ground being prepared in anticipation of planting at the earliest opportunity, he said.

"This rush to cash in on unheard of profits is very reminiscent of the California gold rush of 150 years ago. Then, like now, little regard was given to the consequences of their actions, or the harm that might come to others. 'Get rich quick' was the only thing that mattered. Our precarious groundwater situation is analogous to a wildfire burning out of control and the issuance of hundreds of new industrial well drilling permits is like using gasoline to extinguish the flames."

Booker cited studies by the Oakdale Irrigation District (OID) that showed groundwater levels dropping from May 2005 through November 2013. "The really scary part is that these steady declines were occurring before the county issued hundreds of new well drilling permits for new orchards," he said.

Calling the situation a "perfect storm," Booker called for a moratorium on "all new industrial-size agricultural well-drilling permits." He then asked that Stanislaus County

fund an Environmental Impact Report to determine the impact new wells "may have on the long-term sustainability of our groundwater table."

After Booker's presentation, a long line of Valley citizens spoke again and again about the ongoing harm brought about by mining groundwater in the foothills. Two themes dominated: speculation and sustainability.

"Outside speculators...have put our community in crisis," said Frank Clark. "It's so unfair," said Kathy Smith. "Those speculators are planting on rangeland that has no chance of getting [surface] water." "I'm in the process of losing my well," said Mabel Jones.

The citizen outcry came directly after a glowing report about Stanislaus County's record farm income. Almonds replaced dairy products as the number one farm product and produced over a billion dollars in gross income. The report also noted that over the last seven years there was 61,000 acre increase in almond orchards. If it weren't for a historic drought, the proliferation of almond acreage might go unnoticed. But today, almost everyone knows almonds require lots of water. In fact, 61,000 acres require over 180,000 acre feet of water a year, just about the same amount needed to serve the entire city of Modesto.

The farm income report didn't say how many acres of those new orchards rely solely on groundwater, but Valley citizens are learning the hard way that it's far too many.

Absent quick action by Stanislaus County Supervisors, only the state can prevent an epic catastrophe.

Eric Cain

The Valley Citizen - August 13, 2014

Scholarship Recipients 2014

Each year, Farmland Working Group sends scholarship applications to every high school, public and private, in Stanislaus and Merced counties. Graduating seniors are eligible to complete the application and explore the topic, using verbal and/or visual means: Why is it important to conserve and/or mitigate farmland in California's Central Valley?

Annually, a \$300 scholarship is awarded to the senior who best explores the question. A member of the FWG Board presents the scholarship at the student's high school awards program. This year, the Scholarship Committee selected two winning essays. Larry Byrd, Jr., from Waterford High School, and Erica Stewart, from Buhach Colony High School in Atwater, each received an FWG scholarship.



Growing up in the Central Valley and raised on an almond/cattle ranch, I know first hand the value of our farmland and personally believe it is irreplaceable. Therefore, I would advise community leaders to be very cautious when it

comes to growth at the expense of it. Decisions should not be made in haste and only after carefully considering the input of fellow community members.

I realize that some growth is inevitable and needed, but it needs to stay within city limits if at all possible. Farmland cannot be created; there is no practical way to lessen the loss when acres are developed or converted to other uses. Once land has been paved over, it usually cannot be returned to production.

I would also emphasize to community leaders that farmland is a nonrenewable natural resource that serves several important economic and environmental functions. Crops and live-

stock raised on it provide food products and raw materials used to manufacture goods for consumers throughout the world. It absorbs rainwater, helping to replenish groundwater supplies and reduce flooding. Farmland provides habitat for wildlife and open space that enhances the landscape. It provides jobs for farmers and others working in ag-related businesses.

Also, markets for locally grown foods are growing, putting more money into the hands of farmers, ranchers, and communities. These markets depend on the land remaining productive and available for agriculture.

In closing, I would remind our leaders that working farms and ranches are part of our heritage and vital to our legacy. Protecting farmland is necessary to meet the needs of people in our community, the United States, and around the globe.

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Larry Byrd, Jr.

A Vision for the Future of Farmland

A few weeks ago, as I was driving with my family through Modesto, I was somewhat shocked and irritated to see solar panels covering acres of farmland. My father turned to us and he reminded us of the fact that this was indeed, prime farmland, some of the best in our area. Instead of putting it in a less fertile area,

The Central Valley is continuing to lose more and more land to egregious waste that could have been prevented with more judicious planning with farm resources.

that by the end of this century, our population will have reached eleven billion people. The most worrisome factor in this is that we may not have the means to feed everyone. It all will depend upon one factor: how well we conserve

with less worth to agriculture, these panels were placed on farmland.

Sadly, this is only one instance in the gigantic problem facing agriculture. The Central Valley is continuing to lose more and more land to egregious waste that could have been prevented with more judicious planning with farm resources.

Our planet is rapidly growing. It is estimated

the available fertile farmland that we have. Agricultural land is not something to be taken lightly; especially not in the abundant Central Valley.

We all have a paramount responsibility, whether we are farmers and ranchers, business people, industries, or even home builders: to preserve our resources. Farmland should be preserved, and I don't say this lightly. Our state has earned the reputation of being the top producer of agricultural products in the nation, and the Central Valley alone, with more than 230 crops grown, and yielding over a third of the nation's produce.

Land should be used efficiently and effectively. All industries must be made aware of the importance of agriculture in our valley. Through advocacy and education of the public perhaps we can stop this cycle of farm waste and look ahead to a bright future for California agriculture in the abundant Central Valley.

Erica Stewart



BUILD UP MODESTO, NOT OUT!

Save Farmland Protect Our Heritage

www.stampoutsprawl.com



WE ARE WATCHING...

Stanislaus Council of Governments/StanCOG

www.stancog.org

With over five decades included in the planning and implementation of the “new” alignment of state route 132, here is another update: StanCOG is writing a letter to support our local state senate and assembly representatives with the latest facts to help persuade CalTrans of our desires regarding the funding of the route. Funding has been the major setback for decades. The current phase of funding may provide for the construction of 4 lanes between Fwy 99 and Dakota Avenue, at an estimated cost of \$55 million. Most of the land for the route has been owned or controlled by the state for years.

Involvement of our representatives, Gray, Olsen, Canella, and Berryhill, working as a team, is critical to get a freeway to freeway connection from Fwy 99 to Hwy 132. Without their support, our community faces a congestion-prone intersection at the westside foot of the Kansas/Needham bridge, if existing plans are built.

County of Stanislaus

www.stancounty.com

With several cities taking action that focuses on their sprawl, the County will need to address the issue of piece-meal sprawl. That is, since the passage of Measure E, the County cannot allow residential development without voter approval, but commercial and industrial development continues to convert agricultural lands outside our cities. FWG recommends that the County adopt policies that retain current ag zoned lands that are outside of cities’ spheres of influence. Without clarifying County policies regarding ag zoned land, our best farmland will continue to be a “consideration” for urbanization. A countywide Plan for Ag will be greater certainty for all. With the return of a much needed economic recovery, our land-use plans need to reflect the will of our citizens. Better use of existing under-developed areas in our cities and throughout our county are desired.

Water issues are in the news as we go into our 3rd year of drought. The Water Advisory Com-

mittee, set up by the County Board of Supervisors, has made recommendations yet actions are difficult to make without better knowledge of the status of our groundwater levels. No one knows how water moves beneath us, what quantity is available and how it can be maintained sustainably. It is likely that the state will impose requirements on local jurisdictions who do not tackle this fluid subject.

City of Newman

www.cityofnewman.com

The voters of Newman are getting the opportunity to adopt a type of urban limit for their city. City leaders have placed their own Save Our Agricultural Resources (SOAR) initiative on the ballot. SOAR was adopted in the cities within Ventura County to help protect their best farmland. The Newman City Council reviewed and amended the Ventura SOAR to fit the needs of its city, according to City Manager Mike Holland, who spearheaded the local effort. Despite the large size of the urban limit plan, Newman’s historical development patterns, and commitment to their agricultural heritage, may help them to retain their small town feel and size. SOAR calls on the City to maintain its Central Business District and promote infill projects. SOAR will be Measure Z for Newman voters this November.

City of Modesto

www.modestogov.com

The General Plan (GP) update continues through the planning department process and is expected to return for public comment and City Council approval in 2016. Despite the likelihood of the adoption by voters of the Stamp Out Sprawl (SOS) Initiative in November 2015, the GP update deals with many important issues not tied to the urban limit restrictions of SOS. Many of the amendments to the GP involve land-use issues that pertain to existing urban uses. Though state law requires the City to plan for a much larger population, it does not specify where or how that population is to be planned. Thus, cities can plan for impacts of population increases and build up, instead of out.



Message from Supervisor Terry Withrow

*Welcome Speech -
Wood Colony Fair, Aug. 16
Hart-Ransom School, Modesto*

This is where our growth should come from, within, building on our agricultural base, not from trying to attract some new industry from outside the County.

Today, we are here to celebrate the heritage of Wood Colony. It wasn't long ago that Stanislaus County consisted of a lot of Wood Colony type communities. Unfortunately, over time, in the name of what we've been told is good for our County, these communities have been pushed out and paved over. We've been told that development of these areas will bring jobs and make this a better place.

Well, that's the mentality that got us into the mess we're in.

What's made this a great place are the Wood Colonies of our County. It is from these areas of strong family values, work ethics and character building that this County was built. It's these areas that we need to preserve, promote and get back to, in order to restore this County to the place that it once was.

To that end, we have the **SOS Ballot Initiative**, an initiative, for which we are gathering signatures, that will be on Modesto's November 2015 ballot. What this will do is draw a line around Modesto's current city limits and prevent any future expansion of those boundaries without a vote of the people of Modesto.

This should secure Wood Colony from any further attempts of annexation since over the last twenty years, the citizens of Modesto have overwhelmingly opposed any attempt to annex and pave over our County's farm land.



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 www.farmlandworkinggroup.org

FWG ADVOCATES FOR THE LONG-TERM PROTECTION OF FARMLAND
AND SMART GROWTH IN OUR URBAN COMMUNITIES



Conversation with Supervisor Jim DeMartini Regarding Conversion of Rangeland to Permanent Crops

What is the county doing to deal with the well water issue?

“The county is essentially doing nothing to stop the conversion of rangeland to orchards. There should be no more conversion of rangeland to permanent crops under any circumstances.

Nothing has been done, nothing.

I’m frustrated that the board of supervisors hasn’t dealt with this issue before it became a big problem; drought or no drought, this is an enormous problem.”

What’s the role of the water advisory committee?

“The committee was created to take the heat off the supervisors. It’s a diversion from dealing with the issue; it’s kicking the can down the road. Don’t expect anything to come from the advisory committee that couldn’t have come from the BOS.”