

Solano County's Agricultural Sustainability at the Crossroads

Solano County agriculture is struggling to survive in the face of competition from local development. This trend is intensified through the lack of opportunities agricultural entrepreneurs have to create new markets for themselves. To facilitate communication between producers and consumers and communication between individual producers, various activities-including community forums, educational workshops, and an agricultural exposition-were held on topics related to the future of Solano County's community food system and agricultural sustainability. Through these events urban consumers were able to connect with producers and discuss issues of local agricultural sustainability. Producers were able to gain access to new networking opportunities and participate in educational opportunities.

Project Impacts:

- Five forums in three communities were held to discuss the value of local agriculture within Solano County's agriculture. The forums brought together citizens/consumers, policy makers, and local farmers in a format that allowed for frank discussion and educational exchanges. Thirty-five residents attended one or more of the forums and many asked that similar forums be held in other Solano County communities. Data collected on residents' concerns about Solano County's agricultural sustainability is being forwarded to the Citizen's Advisory Committee for the General Plan Update.
- Four workshops were held for producers to discuss priority business concerns. More than 100 local growers, ranchers, consumers, and policy-makers participated, many attending multiple events. During the workshops producers were able to network within the agricultural community as well as participate in educational forums on marketing. One notable Dixon farmer who participated in the workshops was able to take the information he learned on directly marketing specialty products and place his olive oil in a large-scale California grocery chain. This generated media coverage in the local newspaper and as a UC Delivers article.
- The workshops also provided an opportunity for producers to develop a list of "demands" related to promoting local agriculture. As a direct result of this activity, the Solano Board of Supervisors approved two "ombudsman" positions designed to help farmers as they seek information and support for their enterprises. These discussions also shaped three educational workshops and tours offered in 2008. These events included a day-long agricultural tour and seminar sharing the northeast Solano County's "agricultural footprint" with local county decision and policy-makers, a full-day advocacy and media training for fourteen Solano County agricultural leaders, and a tour of the National Clonal Germplasm Repository for local growers.



- A large Ag Expo event was held at the City of Vallejo Ferry Plaza and Building. This event connected urban Vallejo and Benicia residents commuting home from San Francisco with their local farming neighbors. A dozen local growers set up booths and displays at this event; three of these farmers established a new CSA in conjunction with Solano County employees. The CSA is now in its second year and has 66 county employees participating.
- The project interviewed consumers, producers, and policymakers to identify appropriate “branding” topics for Solano County agriculture. Through surveys and individual interviews, the staff found that consumers understood the benefits of “fresh and local” and want to support local farmers, but they cannot find local produce in supermarkets, where they by and large do their food shopping. Farmers were likewise supportive of a “fresh and local” brand, but their current growing habits would be unable to meet a rise in demand, if the marketing venture would be successful. Producers are still focused on a “commodity” growing approach to farming. This and other marketing information obtained from the survey will be shared with the newly hired Farm Assistance, Revitalization and Marketing Coordinator (F.A.R.M.) located in the County Agricultural Commissioner’s office.

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About 40 tractors travel through downtown Fairfield in a show of support for the Solano County General Plan. The tractors parked in front of the county building where the farmers and farm workers attended the Solano County Board of Supervisors meeting.

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