

AGRICULTURE AT THE CROSSROADS

Why Should We Sustain Agriculture in Solano County?

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Introduction

Our topic is the sustainability of agriculture in Solano County. It is a topic with great complexity, because of the nature of agriculture, and the nature of sustainability, and the nature of Solano County. It is also a highly emotional issue for many, particularly the farmers of the county. This discussion guide proposes three approaches for in-depth and comprehensive conversation on the topic of the sustainability of agriculture. While each approach is presented to be an unbiased option for public decisions, there is a foundational bias in the discussion—that agriculture **should be** sustained in Solano County. From this clearly biased position, we can explore together why...and how...we would take action to sustain agriculture in Solano County.

Sustainability is a topic for the 21st century. The frontiers have been absorbed, and now decisions must be made more and more often about how our spaces will be 'filled-in.' Sustainable development...sustainable community...sustainable industry... sustainable agriculture. You may have heard these words used in many different ways, but what does 'sustainability' really mean and how can we tell if our current practices are sustainable? Since we need to start talking at some point, for this conversation we will propose that *sustainability is related to the quality of life in a community—whether the economic, social and environmental systems that make up the community are providing a healthy, productive, meaningful life for all community residents, present and future.*

When discussing sustainability, several terms seem to be used no matter who is framing the way we talk about the issue. This discussion guide includes a simple list of definitions to help create an effective foundation for formal and informal conversations. These terms are not presented as the only definitions, but they are relatively unbiased in their approach to the topic and are included in most online and professional guides on sustainability. We'll use terms like—sustain, develop, community, economy, community capital, carrying capacity, and equity. While other definitions for these terms may influence the way we talk about sustainability, the terms themselves are standard in understanding the complexities of sustainability.

One further note must be made concerning the definition of terms. 'Sustainable agriculture' as a term has been developed in recent years to signify some specific farming practices for food production that are organic, non-polluting, energy-efficient, and community-friendly. While these practices may become the standards for all agricultural production in the future, the thrust of this discussion guide is to propose the need to sustain all agriculture, regardless of the methods used.

Agricultural sustainability in general seeks to sustain farmers, resources and communities by promoting farming practices and methods that are profitable, environmentally sound and good for communities. It works on farms and ranches large and small, harnessing new technologies and renewing the best practices of the past. It is a system of farm production that can indefinitely sustain itself without degrading the land, the wider environment or the people. It reflects our concern with long-term viability and security of our communities, our resources and our nation.

Approach One: Stability for the Local Economy

Agriculture continues to be the most important single factor in a diversified, local economy investment portfolio. Diversification is a risk-management technique that mixes a wide variety of investments within a portfolio. The rationale behind this practice contends that a portfolio of different kinds of investments will, on average, yield higher returns and pose a lower risk than any individual investment found within the portfolio. This principle applies to any local economy as decisions are made about how to best invest the various types of community capital—natural, human, social, information and infrastructure. Agriculture plays an important role in most local economies, contributing significantly in each of these five types of community capital.

Agriculture has also provided a consistently effective means for community capital transfers from one generation to another. In the context of sustainability, 'equity' introduces fairness into short- and long-term public decisions. This concept is most often referred to as intra-generational equity, meaning justice among the various members of the present population. In addition, inter-generational equity has to do with fairness between current and future members of a community. It doesn't mean that we neglect our current needs, but that we try to achieve a reasonable balance between satisfying our needs now and setting aside enough to provide for needs in the future. Aiming for inter-generational equity means we want to give equal consideration to our own immediate needs, our own future needs and our children's and grandchildren's future needs.

Some possible actions:

- Incorporate agricultural business strategies in the economic development plans of local counties and cities
- Give subsidized access for farmers and ranchers to agricultural, economic and environmental consultants so all agricultural producers can create a business plan for current and sustainable viability
- Promote agricultural diversification through planting new crops or shifting to a different mix of crops and livestock, developing new products or services or targeting new markets
- Provide tax incentives to farmers and ranchers who change their agricultural practices to defer current benefits and invest in inter-generational equity
- Organize and publicize agricultural tourism efforts that bring in new customers and promote farm products

Supporters of this approach might say:

- The best way to protect farmland is to ensure that farming is profitable
- Communities with a diverse economic profile, including a thriving and diverse agricultural component, are more stable in the short-term and long-term
- Communities that plan for inter-generational equity provide entrepreneurs and young people with the incentives they need to invest in the future

Critics of this approach might say:

- Changes in agricultural markets requires economic agility, making accurate, long-term planning almost impossible
- If farmers and ranchers participate in the 'diversification' plan and fail to make a profit, the county would potentially be held liable for damages

A likely tradeoff:

- I would be willing to use more sustainable practices, IF I had confidence that consumers would pay for the additional costs I'll have

Approach Two: Effective Open Space Management

Agriculture has a long and successful history in open space management. Farmers and ranchers have been 'de facto' managers of our most scenic landscapes across the country without recognition or thanks. Well-managed agricultural land supplies important non-market goods and services. Farm and ranch lands provide food and cover for wildlife, help control flooding, protect wetlands and watersheds, and maintain air quality. They can absorb and filter wastewater and provide groundwater recharge. Some agricultural lands also can provide sites for alternative energy production, like wind farms and methane digesters. Farmers and ranchers have the knowledge and commitment needed to effectively manage the majority of our open spaces for the enrichment of all citizens.

In addition, agriculture provides these benefits at a very low cost. New housing developments require services such as schools, roads and fire/police protection, whereas privately owned and managed agricultural land requires few services. The Cost of Community Services (COCS) studies of *American Farmland Trust* (AFT) show that, on a nationwide basis, farm, forest and open lands more than pay for the municipal services they require, while taxes on residential uses, on average, fail to cover costs. When agriculture is recognized properly in its 'open space management' role in local communities and across the country, new partnerships can be created to enhance the quality of life in increasingly sustainable ways.

Some possible actions:

- Promote the establishment of 'purchase of agricultural conservation easements' (PACE) and 'purchase of development rights' (PDR) to permanently protect farmland through pro-active investment
- Provide direct subsidies or tax incentives to farmers and ranchers who enter into an 'open space management' agreement with the county, enhancing the rural experience of all citizens in the process
- Establish an 'open space management code' that provides a minimum standard of maintenance and upkeep for agricultural land, so land cannot be abandoned in hopes of future development
- Provide tax incentives to farmers and ranchers who reclaim abandoned land and return the land to agricultural production
- Give subsidized access for farmers and ranchers to open space management and alternative energy production consultants to encourage innovative land management practices

Supporters of this approach might say:

- Controlling sprawl around growing cities is not a simple task, and it's everyone's business for current and future generations
- Communities can determine the fate of their neighboring land in partnership with farmers and ranchers who are willing to manage the land on behalf of the public
- Communities can limit the development of agricultural land, using reliable cost-analysis methods to counter the claims of developers

Critics of this approach might say:

- Protecting land from development won't make agriculture profitable—as farmers go out-of-business, the land will just lie fallow indefinitely
- Creating an 'open space management' process will just add to the bureaucracy

A likely tradeoff:

- I would be willing to invest more in 'open space management', IF I had confidence that my efforts would be appreciated

Approach Three: Food Security...Local & National

Agriculture produces a basic human and societal need—food. The U.S. continues to be a strong food exporter in some commodities while it is rapidly becoming a food importer in other commodities. Our food exports give us a consistently positive global image as hungry people around the world benefit from our production, but increasing fuel costs and decreasing farmland acreages due to development, erosion and economic losses threaten to reduce our export capacity. Our food imports, on the other hand, may eventually create a dangerous foreign dependency where food, not just oil, is either not available or available only at a very high price. United States national security is at stake as our export capacity decreases and our import dependency increases.

According to a study published by the *Carrying Capacity Network*, 'population growth and the loss of farmland reduces self-sufficiency in food, availability of vital natural resources, standard of living, and ultimately U.S. national security. The United States is in a privileged situation compared to many other nations in the world because its per capita endowment of natural resources is relatively high based on its current population density. However, the United States is at serious risk of losing this privilege if attention is not given to the control of population growth (including immigration), the sustainable management of natural resources, and the development of alternative energy sources. Food security depends on ample fertile land, fresh water, energy, and protecting biodiversity of plant and animal species.' As global tensions increase, our capacity to provide for our own basic needs—like food—becomes more and more important, making our nation's farmers and ranchers key protectors of our national security.

Some possible actions:

- Incorporate both export and local consumer agricultural production into the General Plan for Solano County
- Educate the public on food issues, including America's role in feeding the world and the balance of trade in food commodities
- Provide tax incentives to Solano County producers to grow for local farmers' markets, identifying county products with a easily identifiable logo
- Plan for decreased fuel and fertilizer dependence in agricultural production
- Create an emergency food production plan for Solano County in the event of major food distribution disruptions

Supporters of this approach might say:

- National security increases as foreign dependency decreases...in energy, in industry, in food
- The protection of our national carrying capacity is a primary national security focus, worthy of local attention and action
- America's fertile land is one of our greatest assets as a free nation...and one of our greatest assets in spreading freedom with other nations

Critics of this approach might say:

- Free trade food imports have reduced food prices and increased the selection of foods available to consumers—protectionism will reverse this positive trend
- Our local economy can't take responsibility for protecting our national security—it's not our job

A likely tradeoff:

- I would be willing to invest in more local market production, IF I had confidence that I'd be able to sell everything I produce at a sustainable price