



Robert Abbott, a Carpinteria avocado and lemon farmer, is a member of the Ag Futures Alliance. He was a guest speaker at public forums the group had this spring as part of the "Farm to Fork" program. Photo by Sharon Dirlam.

## Eco and ag devotees, often at odds, learn compromise in Ag Futures Alliance of Santa Barbara County

BY SHARON DIRLAM

In this age of politicians and pundits who shout, interrupt and harangue each other, the group Ag Futures Alliance of Santa Barbara County stands in sharp contrast.

You might expect some fireworks on hot-button issues like land use, given that the diverse group includes members from both agricultural and environmental communities. But not so.

It hasn't always been that way. Back

in 2008 when the group formed, Teri Bontrager, executive director of the Santa Barbara County Farm Bureau, had this to say: "Farmers and environmentalists have spent a lot of time talking about each other and not much time talking to each other."

They've come a long way. Recently, she said, "In our meetings, we bridge the divide between farmers and urban people, north and south county, growers

and environmental people. We talk. We listen. We don't shout. We set goals, and we work together to accomplish them."

The first major goal was to develop and submit to Santa Barbara County a "draft buffer zone policy" to protect agriculturally zoned land from encroachment and to increase the compatibility of proposed land use on adjacent property.

Noise, dust, trespassing, pesticides

and erosion are some of the issues addressed in the draft policy, along with a major issue of contention: how big the buffer zone should be between agricultural use and development.

"We wanted to bring different sides to the table. It took us five years to build the model for the alliance, to find common ground between agricultural interests and environmentalists, and then to identify people on both sides willing to engage, to be respectful to each other," said Eric Cardenas, formerly with the Environmental Defense Center, a founding alliance member, and currently the facilitator for the Ag Futures Alliance.

The group meets several times a year at Alma Rosa Winery near Buellton. Vintner Richard Sanford said he offered his conference room because it's a natural peaceful setting, out of range for cell phones, and conducive to the kinds of discussions the group wants to have.

"Anger is hard on people," Sanford said. "And it doesn't get you anywhere. The alliance is a great group of people interested in longer term vision and compromise for the future."

Much is at stake. Agriculture is Santa Barbara County's largest producing industry; the gross agricultural production countywide is over one billion dollars a year. The number of acres in agricultural use is 710,820.

As for the buffer zone, environmentalists and agriculturalists aren't the only ones who want a say in the size of the zone. County officials will also be hearing from developers, builders, and business people before deciding the issue. Some say the plan is long overdue. Ventura and San Luis Obispo counties are among several around the state that have already established such rules.

"Placing new housing tracts next to active agricultural land is a conflict waiting to happen," said Christina McGinnis of the Environmental Defense Center and an alliance member. Ultimately, a county buffer policy should establish guidelines for proposed developments near farms.

"We can't afford to operate in this county the way we have for the past 30

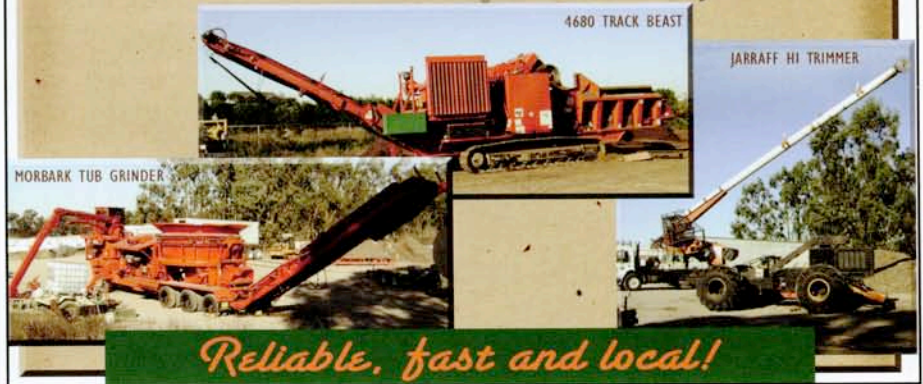
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years," Cardenas said.

The alliance's buffer plan was handed to the county in March 2010.

Now, more than a year later, Peter Imhof, supervising planner for the Planning and Development Department of Santa Barbara County, said: "We're at the end of developing a draft (buffer zone) ordinance based in part on the work of such groups." It's being reviewed in-house and was to be ready for public input in June. An agricultural buffer ordinance "is part of our work," he said. "It's overdue. Other jurisdictions already have buffer policies in place."

Mike Hayes, the county's project manager for developing the plan, said, "We've been talking about this for several years. I would say the Ag Alliance has been a prime mover in getting it to move forward in a timely manner. It has provided a lot of good information and suggested formats. One major difference is that they proposed a policy be established, but we are working on a proposed ordinance for this county."

The county's process has included outreach to environmental groups, building groups, contractors, growers associations in the north and south counties, ranchers, vintners, and others.

While waiting for further action on that front, the Ag Futures Alliance has turned its attention to the goal of promoting better communication between agricultural interests and the general public.

To this end, the alliance is sponsoring a series of "Farm to Fork" events, aiming to increase local awareness about farming and ranching. Public forums, in Santa Barbara in March and Santa Maria in April, were well-attended, Bontrager said.

"The people who come are really two different groups," she said. "In Santa Barbara, there's a lot of interest among 'foodies' - what goes into the food we put on our tables, how it's produced, buying fresh and buying local, and, of course, environmentalists. In Santa Maria, there's a lot of interest among agricultural people on such issues as farmworker housing, agricultural viabil-

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ity, and product distribution.”

June and September events are in the works as well, with two planned bus tours to local farms, ranches, agricultural processing and distribution centers, the Food Bank of Santa Barbara County and other places. Finally, in December, a panel will look at the consumer’s role in supporting local farms, and will also focus on diet-related illnesses, access to healthy food, institutional purchasing, and school food reform.

Joseph McIntyre of the Ag Innovations Network, based in Sebastapol, said there are seven alliances around the state, starting with Ventura County’s group back in 1999. “We want to reconnect farmers and the public,” he said. “Democracy works when people understand each other. We register our opinions and set a good example. It’s not productive for people to yell at each other. It doesn’t work. We want to build better fences between farmers and their neighbors and a better life for both.”

*Sharon Dirlam is a Santa Barbara-based freelance writer.*

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