

BUYING LOCAL: GOOD FOR THE FARMER, GOOD FOR THE CONSUMER

by Linda Parks Supervisor District 2, June 2008

Ventura County leaders and residents took deliberate steps to protect our rich farming heritage. Having some of the best prime agricultural land in the nation, our County literally feeds the world. Ventura County provides a large share of the world's lemons and avocados, and our own Boskovich Farm's lettuce seems to be everywhere, including a little store on one of the most remote islands in the Bahamas! Our number one cash crop, strawberries, were valued at a half billion dollars last year.

Clearly we have had success in keeping our agricultural lands available for farming. Our farming industry has been sustainable, often turning over three rotations of crops during a single year in a climate that is conducive to growing a great variety of fruits, vegetables and ornamental plants. Yet, like farmers in most areas, Ventura County farmers face an onslaught of battles against forces both natural and manmade. Pests, urban encroachment, and the availability of water are familiar battle grounds faced by farmers. However today there is an equally threatening and potentially long-lasting problem emerging that can change the face of the agricultural industry world-wide: higher fuel costs.

While we are feeling the escalating cost for gasoline at the pump, truckers are experiencing diesel fuel priced at \$5 a gallon and climbing. The increasing cost to ship produce by truck, air, or ship is taking its toll on the agricultural industry. Likewise, the cost to import food to our region is increasingly expensive to consumers as the average American meal travels some 1500 miles to get from farm to plate.

Compounding the problem of fuel costs is the practice of growing a particular crop almost exclusively in one region of the world to be shared globally. Included in the mix is the recent loss of food crops and forests to make way for corn to be used for ethanol. The global rice shortage and food riots are in part outgrowths of these practices and high fuel costs. As one of our most basic needs becomes increasingly expensive and difficult to obtain, it becomes evident that the ability of Ventura County farmers to feed our region is a matter of vital importance.

Having the foresight to protect our agricultural lands has paid off in strengthening our local economy and promoting wise land use patterns. In the future, farmers will play an even more pivotal role in providing a local source of food as we shift away from long distance goods movement. Their decision to diversify their crops in conjunction with local markets that sell their produce, can be the single most effective answer to high food prices and food scarcity.

As residents we need to do our part to help open up more opportunities to buy locally. Ask your grocery store to stock more Ventura County produce, which will in turn encourage more farmers to diversify their crops to meet regional demands. Patronize

farmers' markets. Not only will buying local support Ventura County farmers, help our economy, provide fresher produce that's good for our health, and cost less, it also has the advantage of reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

We are blessed to have some of the best soils and climate for growing, and the vision to protect our farmland. There is still more we can do to protect our remaining farmland and assist farmers to help guarantee Ventura County's agricultural viability. With the greater significance placed on local food sources should come greater recognition of the importance farmland plays in the security of our region.