

## **Ag, biofuels compatible, group says**

Sustainable Conservation: Farms can make a profit and protect environment

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As guests munched on cheese, fruit and other snacks, Ladi Asgill held up a jar of canola oil for all to see.

Asgill, speaking at Thursday's grand opening of Sustainable Conservation's branch office in Modesto, said canola is one of the state's most promising sources of energy from farm products.

"We're very excited about the prospects for biofuels in California," said Asgill, a project manager for the San Francisco-based group. "The era of the \$70barrel of crude oil has made this possible."

Sustainable Conservation works with farmers and other businesspeople on ways they can protect the environment while still making a profit. It set up the Modesto office — in the Great Valley Center building on Needham Street — to be close to farmers in the Central Valley.

The group has worked with dairy operators on equipment that digests manure and turns it into methanol, which is burned to make electricity.

It has promoted the sowing of dairy feed crops through the previous harvest's residue, leaving the soil unturned and reducing the number of diesel-burning tractor passes.

Sustainable Conservation is exploring several sources of biodiesel, using crops or used cooking grease.

Asgill said the state cannot match the grain and soybean production of the Midwest, but niches for fuel-producing crops are possible. For example, he said, canola can be grown by California cotton farmers over the winter, providing extra income.

Asgill, an economist with experience in the seed industry and other facets of valley agriculture, is the lone staff person in the Modesto office.

Ashley Boren, executive director of Sustainable Conservation, said the group does not try to meet its goals through lawsuits, increased regulation or land acquisition.

"We really believe that agricultural landowners can be and are good stewards of the natural resources we all depend on," said Boren, a member of the state Board of Food and Agriculture.

Asgill put it another way: "Instead of meeting the farmers in the courtroom, we're meeting them out in the fields."

**On the Net:** [www.suscon.org](http://www.suscon.org).

