

Environmentalist seeks alliance with ag

Sustainable Conservation director wants farming to be economically viable

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SACRAMENTO — Environmentalist Ashley Boren may be one of agriculture's natural-born allies.

Boren, 45, has a passion for protecting California's natural resources, the perspective of what it takes to operate a successful business and an understanding that sustainable farming and ranching can be a part of the environmental solution.

For the past nine years Boren has directed Sustainable Conservation, a San Francisco-based environmental group founded by her father, Frank, in 1992.

The nonprofit organization is dedicated to working with businesses and private landowners to promote good stewardship practices. The group has helped promote the use of methane digesters on dairies and simplify the regulatory maze to promote restoration projects on private lands.

Sustainable Conservation has also been a cheerleader for conservation tillage and is exploring the Golden State's future as a biofuels producer.

Leading the way is Boren, who shares her father's interest in imagining solutions where other people may only see problems.

"There are plenty enough people out there working on identifying the problems," she said. "But not enough working on the solutions."

Boren, who believes she might be the first (or at least one of the first) appointee to the State Board of Food and Agriculture who hails from an environmental organization, sees agriculture as part of the bigger picture when it comes to protecting natural resources.

She embraces the cows, not condos, philosophy.

"I don't want to see another Los Angeles," she said of the state's insatiable desire to develop prime agricultural land to make room for its exploding population growth.

"I would much rather see agriculture occupying that land... than any other land use. And agriculture needs to be very viable to hold off that development."

In Boren's view, business economics and environmental quality can coexist.

On top of earning an undergraduate degree in biology and a master's degree, both from Stanford, Boren boasts an eight-year career in business. She worked in finance and new business development for Smith & Hawken, a mail order and retail gardening company.



Ashley Boren, executive director of Sustainable Conservation, stands in front of the California U.S. Environmental Protection Agency building in Sacramento. Sustainable Conservation has reached out to the farming community to help resolve environmental issues while keeping businesses viable.

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For more information about Sustainable Conservation, visit www.suscon.org.

"It gave me respect for what businesses have to do to operate," she said. "It's not easy running a small business or medium-sized business."

While that business sense has helped her develop innovative ideas for the agricultural industry, it has also helped her build Sustainable Conservation into an influential environmental organization.

When the group started in the early 1990s, it had an annual budget of just \$500,000 and a staff of five. Now the organization has nearly 20 employees and a \$2.5 million budget.

The group's newest project focuses on stemming the sale of invasive species in California nurseries and garden centers.

Sustainable Conservation has teamed up with horticultural industry leaders and the state's top nurseries and retailers who have agreed to identify invasive species and replace them on the shelves with native counterparts.

The California Horticultural Invasives Prevention Program was designed as an alternative to regulating the nursery industry.

"By the time you find out a plant's invasive, it's too late to regulate it," Boren said.

It's successes like that she finds most rewarding in her work.

"Having been able to take the ideas my father had and the organization's early successes and build them into robust and effective programs that really are creating change" is the most fulfilling, she said.

To accommodate more work in the agricultural industry, Boren has also overseen the group's expansion. Sustainable Conservation recently opened a new office in Modesto, which will help its leaders facilitate various agricultural projects, which occupy about 70 percent of the organization's workload.

"I think the organization has come a long way," Boren said. "We've made some great progress, but there's also a lot more to do. I'd like the group to realize its full potential."

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