



CALIFORNIA FARM BUREAU FEDERATION

Land Lovers

Stewardship is all in a day's work in California's countryside

January/February 2008

By Jim Morris and Christine Souza

At Craig and Julie McNamara's farm in Solano County, it's not uncommon to hear the pitter-patter of feet. These aren't little feet, mind you, but instead are the tromping of Nike, Converse and Adidas tennis shoes, worn by eager urban teenagers who are often getting their first experience of what life is like outside the city.

"Today's youth are incredibly bright, incredibly open to new ideas and incredibly challenged," McNamara said. "Author Richard Louv coined the term 'nature deficit disorder' and it is occurring across our nation. Young people and many adults are disconnected from nature and have no idea where their food comes from."

To try to rectify that, McNamara, 57, has turned a 325-acre portion of his farm, Sierra Orchards, into the Center for Land-Based Learning, where high school students play a cameo role of farmer and land steward.

The McNamaras' farm is an outdoor classroom where hundreds of students come each year to learn about sustainable farming practices. Like other farmers and ranchers across California, they are not only feeding the world but they are doing it in a way that helps this state remain productive and pristine.

Students who visit the Winters site are part of this ambitious educational effort, making compost and hopping on tractors to plant cover crops that help build up the soil at this organic operation. They also study soil health by taking samples in a trench 5 feet underground. And they learn integrated pest management--how good insects can thwart crop-destroying bugs.

"Our students are our seeds," McNamara said. "They will be making decisions that will affect our future. That's why this investment is so important."

The students' learning curve is not unlike McNamara's, whose unconventional path to the plow helped make him a crusader for environmental preservation.

McNamara's father, Robert, served as secretary of defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and cemented his place in history with his decisions about U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. His mother, Margaret, started the Reading is Fundamental Program, which through bookmobiles and book giveaways has helped foster greater literacy in America.

"Both my mother and father have instilled in me the wonder of participation and giving back," McNamara said. "They are the models I grew up with. It was incumbent upon me to do something for our larger society. I live it every day and enjoy it every day."

That path, however, was at times a rocky one. Filled with ambitions and independence, McNamara shocked his parents by dropping out of Stanford University to pursue farming--a profession he had no experience with but felt compelled to undertake.

That wide-eyed enthusiasm is still evident in this passionate leader, who has learned valuable lessons since he began as an apprentice on a farm in Dixon in 1977 and then purchased his first farm three years later. He primarily grows organic walnuts.

"Life decisions are often neither black nor white," he said. "Many fall into the gray zone in between. It's more of, 'Which direction should we take our life?' To accomplish this, I often ask myself, 'How can I be a positive force for change?'"

McNamara achieves this goal by educating high school students and raising crops that improve the land they inhabit.

Every year, he and his crew hang 40,000 devices throughout his orchards, which have a natural scent that confuses and thwarts a major walnut pest, the codling moth, without using pesticides. He utilizes composted table scraps from San Francisco restaurants to build up the soil. He also has set aside a patch of highly productive land to capture water before it leaves his property, ensuring that no unwanted materials such as sediment will be emptied into what will eventually be drinking water supplies for millions of Californians.



Craig McNamara's farm is an outdoor classroom where students and their teachers--including this group from Sacramento's Luther Burbank High School--come each year to learn about agriculture and the environment.

In addition, McNamara has spent copious time and money to maintain native oak trees, encourage beneficial insects, make his land a paradise for birds and restore a crown jewel on his property--a long stretch of Putah Creek, which he hopes to one day open up to the public for their enjoyment and education.

Fortunately, McNamara is one of many stewards of California's countryside, which provides sustenance, shelter and beauty for consumers and critters alike.

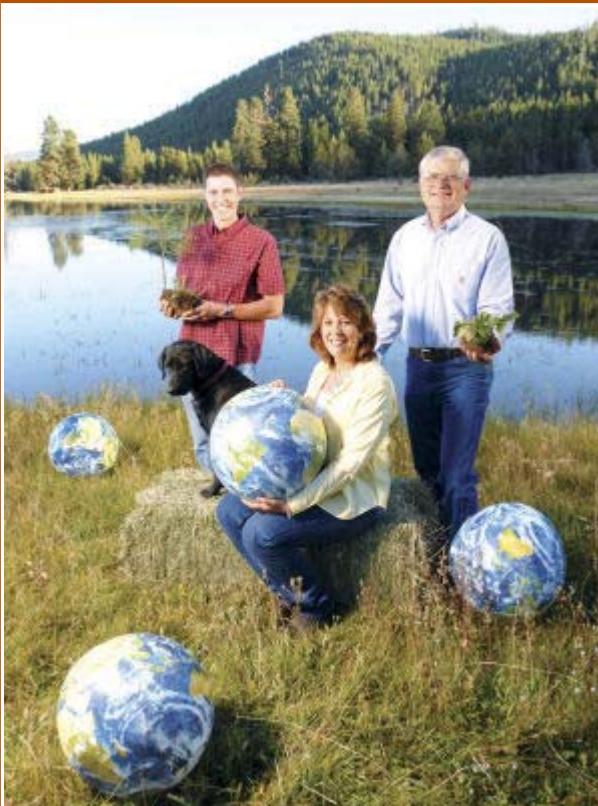
Chet Vogt had a greener future in mind 15 years ago when he purchased the 5,300-acre Three Creeks Ranch. The Glenn County cattle rancher looked past the barren, beaten-down landscape and developed a healthy vision for the property that is now an environmental showpiece. Vogt decided to take a leap of faith and today the healthy working landscape is a perfect balance of environmental and economic health for his 500-head cow/calf operation.

"When I bought this ranch it was an absolute desert. It was really overgrazed and in tough condition, but I could see a lot of opportunity here, so it has been my passion to try and make this ranch into a place where all parts of the ecology could live happily together," Vogt said. "Having the opportunity to share this with future generations is what this is all about."

Northeastern California is where Jim and Mary Rickert and their son, James, can be found, hard at work on a progressive cattle operation that is not only a business but an environmental wonderland.

Bustling with wildlife and habitat, Prather Ranch encompasses several scenic locations that serve as a low-stress home to about 4,000 head of organically and naturally raised cattle. The Rickerts have transformed 34,000 acres into a place to behold.

"We've been in this valley about 30 years and we've been trying to emphasize being able to have a viable business operation with the beef cattle, but we also want to be sure that we enhance and preserve the wildlife," Mary Rickert said. "It makes it worth getting up in the morning to know that we are helping to preserve this valley and a lot of other properties in Northern California. It is



James, Mary and Jim Rickert work to promote biodiversity through their day-to-day operations.

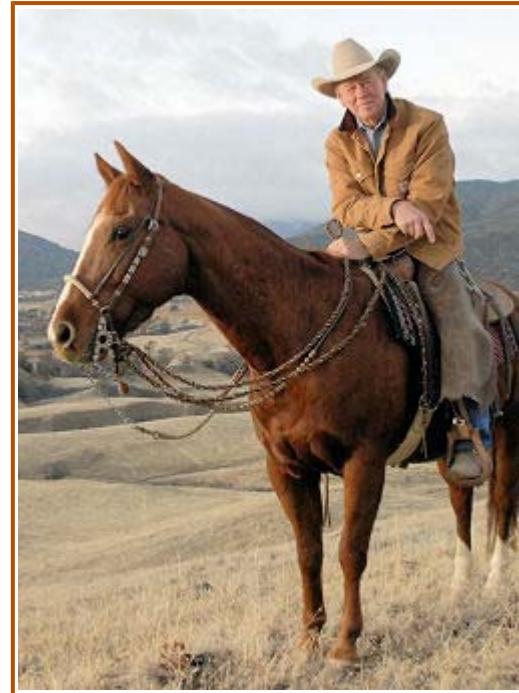
important to know that future generations will enjoy this beautiful landscape."

The Rickerts are passionate about maintaining a diversified beef cattle operation that is environmentally progressive and integrates innovative management practices. In 1990, they developed the nation's first large-scale "closed herd," comprised solely of cattle born and raised on the ranch.

Conservation efforts include the development of foraging habitat for migratory birds, the creation of wildlife ponds, the installation of a hydroelectric plant and the use of solar energy to help power the ranch.

In the family's pursuit of preserving their pastoral paradise, the Rickerts have placed conservation easements on several of their Prather Ranch properties so that they remain part of the working landscape well into the future.

Care and concern for the land is also present in one of California's smallest towns--Parkfield, in Monterey County. When Jack Varian of V6 Ranch started ranching 48 years ago, his priority was all about raising cattle. In more recent years, he has taken a holistic approach to land management and conservation, which means with every



Chet Vogt moves his 500-head herd of cattle around his ranch in a systematic way that creates intensive grazing for a short period of time, followed by a long period of rest and regrowth for the land.



business decision, preservation of the landscape is also a priority. This has led to the development of a more successful ranching operation that now encompasses 17,000 acres.

"Over the years we've tried a lot of things and finally found what is really successful and that is holistic management," Varian said. "The ranch has taken good care of my wife and I, my children and now my grandchildren. It is a member of the family. It responds to good care and bad care, so the idea of not taking care of it is just unthinkable. It is not an option."

Conservation initiatives include rotational grazing to encourage pasture growth and the restoration of willow and cottonwood trees to prevent creek bank erosion, which in turn have increased the diversity of plant and animal life. In addition, Varian and his wife, Zera, developed multiple marketing strategies to supplement family income by educating and entertaining tourists through trail rides and cattle drives. They also placed most of their land into conservation easements, reaching agreements limiting development of the property and preserving its natural beauty for future generations, while also maintaining a working ranch.

Meanwhile, in Stanislaus County, when he's at home shooting hoops with his four sons, one might think dairy farmer Andy Zylstra is simply the all-American dad. But he's not only a caretaker for his family--he has proven to show the same concern for the environment. Zylstra transformed his dairy and the forage he grows into an innovative and highly successful model of resource conservation. He is now considered a champion of sustainable dairy management.

"We need to take care of the environment so it improves our quality of life," Zylstra said. "It is just like anything else. If it is nurtured properly, it will do well and if it isn't, it won't. It behooves us to nurture the land properly so we can be economically viable."

The second-generation dairy producer operates a 330-acre farm with 750 cows and is guided by making a living for his family and an overall belief in the long-term sustainability of natural resources.

With a goal of improving air quality, Zylstra was one of the first dairy farmers in the state to implement conservation tillage. This cultivation method reduces the number of farm equipment passes in the field to decrease dust and particulate matter by as much as 75 percent. In addition, Zylstra utilizes nutrient and wastewater management systems to improve soil and air quality.

From bucolic cattle ranches framed by snowy mountains to orchards just 30 minutes from the state capital, many farmers and ranchers are doing their part to ensure the countryside is as fine as it can be for generations to come.

For their efforts, McNamara, Vogt, the Rickerts, Varian and Zylstra were finalists for the 2007 Leopold Conservation Award, providing a textbook case of caring for the land and maintaining a healthy business.

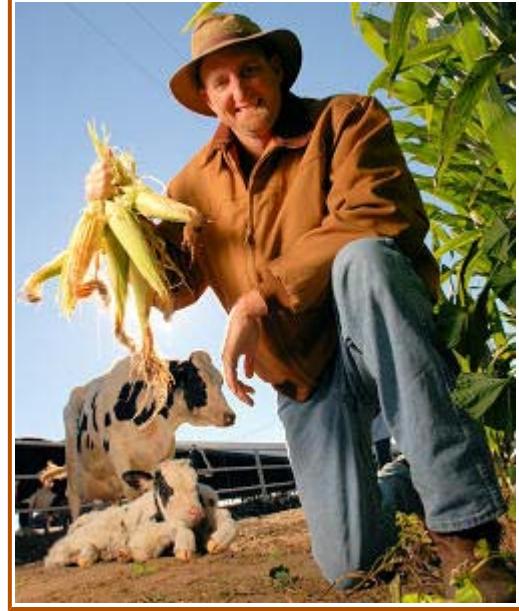
McNamara won top honors, and although flattered at receiving the award, he said that caring for his surroundings and providing an education on the environment are all in a day's work.

"We all are responsible for the well-being of our society," McNamara said. "It is my obligation to assist in that learning process. It's probably the most important thing that I do. It's contact with our future. The students give me back so much. It's the most rewarding thing that I have done in my adult life."

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Jack Varian and his family have been raising cattle on the 17,000-acre V6 Ranch for nearly 50 years with the intention of being good caretakers of the land.



Second-generation dairy farmer Andy Zylstra has introduced numerous environmentally friendly farming techniques to his 750-cow dairy.