



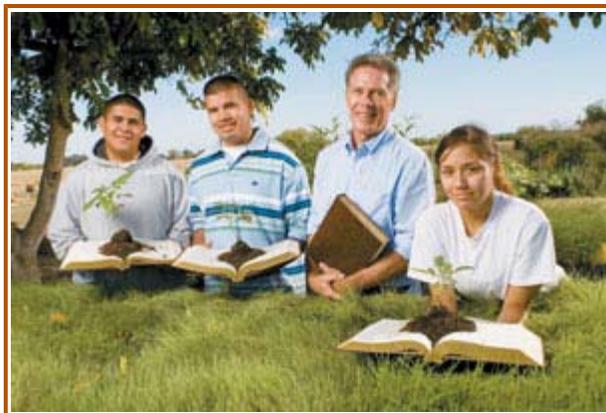
Commentary: Sustainable farming is our legacy for the next generation

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By Craig McNamara

The farm bill that recently passed the U.S. Congress includes increased funding to support conservation, which is a positive development. However, the legislative debate risks masking the truth that stewardship and conservation of the land is an inherent part of smart farming practices. While we farmers and ranchers greatly appreciate the government's encouragement and support, that's not why we do it.

As farmers and ranchers we have an intimate daily relationship with the land, water and air. The land is both our love and our livelihood. Our job is to care for the land, and when we do that well, the land takes care of us. The Leopold Conservation Award, presented annually in California and six other states, recognizes farmers and ranchers who exemplify this ethic. I am proud to have been honored with this award by Sand County Foundation, Sustainable Conservation and California Farm Bureau Federation last year. It is the single most important recognition that our farming operation has received in our 28-year history.



Craig McNamara, owner of Sierra Orchards in Winters, says the Leopold Conservation Award that he received last year is the single most important recognition that his farming operation has received in its 28-year history.

At Sierra Orchards, we utilize both tried-and-true organic farming practices and the most recent technological advances. We've invested in drainage ponds, sediment traps and hedgerow plantings to ensure that no water is wasted and no downstream waterways are affected. We hang more than 40,000 pheromone devices each year to control codling moth pests. And we use composted table scraps from San Francisco restaurants as fertilizer. Sierra Orchards' organic walnut production and sales have steadily increased, demonstrating the integral relationship between economic success and sustained conservation.

It gives me great pleasure to help young people develop a personal connection with the land that feeds them. They are the next generation of land stewards and decision-makers, and it's critical that they understand nature and agriculture. We created the Center for Land-Based Learning based at Sierra Orchards so that California high school students can learn about sustainable agriculture first-hand. At a time when so many students struggle to stay in school, we want to help them become lifelong learners, overcome barriers to change, develop leadership skills and build greater human and social capital in their communities. The program reaches more than 2,000 California students annually. An additional 2,000 adults--scientists, farmers, chefs, environmental experts and more--come to the learning center each year for professional development.

My family and everyone at the Center for Land-Based Learning are very honored to receive the Leopold Conservation Award because we believe so fervently in the ethic of Aldo Leopold and the work of Sand County Foundation. We are also very excited because there are so many California farmers and ranchers who are engaged in visionary and innovative work. Many of us know a farmer or rancher who deserves to be recognized in this way. I encourage everyone to come forward with their stories and submit their nomination for the 2008 award.

Nominations are due July 9. For more information, go to www.leopoldconservationaward.org.

(Craig McNamara is the owner of Sierra Orchards in Winters, Calif., and founder of the Center for Land-Based Learning. He also serves on the California Board of Food and Agriculture and is a founding trustee of UC Merced and a member of the UC Davis Dean's Advisory Council. He won the Leopold Conservation Award in 2007. Craig can be reached at farming@scbglobal.net.)

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