



Montna wins award for conservation efforts

[By Ashley Gebb/Appeal-Democrat](#)

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By embracing solar panels, flooding his fields for wildlife habitat and setting aside acreage into California's first wildlife-friendly agriculture easement, Sutter County rice grower Al Montna has been recognized for practicing exemplary land stewardship and management.

The Sand County Foundation, the Sustainable Conservation and the California Farm Bureau Federation presented him with the \$10,000 fifth annual Leopold Conservation Award this week at the federation's annual meeting. Montna plans to donate the money back to conservation groups.

The award is named in honor of world-renowned conservationist, forester and writer Aldo Leopold, who is considered by some to be the father of wildlife management. It is presented annually to private landowners in eight states.

"It's a tremendous honor to be mentioned in the same breath with Aldo Leopold," said Montna, who began his conservation efforts in the 1980s when the rice industry came under attack for air quality issues related to burning rice straw.

"We entered a partnership with waterfowl and the ducks," he said. "We provided them a place for habitat in the winter and they provide us an avenue to dispose of our straw."

Montna has also placed 2,000 acres of his Dingville ranch into California's first wildlife-friendly agriculture easement, which provides habitat for migrating, wintering or breeding waterfowl and shorebirds and ensures the farmland will remain such.

"Agriculture has been very good to us over time," Montna said. "We felt it was important to preserve it, protect it and put something back that the public could enjoy."

And the impact is obvious, by the thousands of birds who call Montna Farms home in the winter, he said.

"It's a habitat of national prominence for the pintail duck and shorebirds," Montna said. "None of that would have happened if it wasn't for the viability of our farmland."

At Montna Farms, his conservation practices also include monitoring water quality and using laser leveling of his field to minimize herbicides. In 2008, he build a 394-kilowatt solar power facility to offset the energy demands of his rice dryer.

"Al Montna's commitment to the health of the land, water, and wildlife that are in his care is truly inspiring, and his leadership within California's agricultural community helps ensure that his dedication to conservation will endure, especially in future generations of farmers and ranchers," said Dr. Brent Haglund, Sand County Foundation president, in a statement.

Montna beat out two other finalists for the award; Bill and Kay Burrows of Red Bluff, who use holistic

management techniques on their Tehama County ranch and teach sustainable resource management, and Tim Koopman of Sunol, who uses conservation easements to maintain his Alameda County ranch in the face of increasing development.

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