



Leopold Award winner advocates for conservation

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By Tracy Sellers

In a time when instant gratification is often the norm, the finalists for the 2012 Leopold Conservation Award are investing in the future.

"My hope is that by modeling my practices of conservation, I can advocate these ideas to both the farming community and to consumers so that farmers may have a better chance of survival," Dino Giacomazzi said.

The Kings County dairy farmer won the award, which was presented Monday during the California Farm Bureau Federation Annual Meeting in Pasadena.

The Leopold Conservation Award recognizes landowner achievements in voluntary conservation and public education. In California, the award is presented by the Sand County Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation and Sustainable Conservation. The S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation and the Nature Conservancy are major sponsors, as well.

Stephen Pedersen and Jeanne Byrne of Santa Cruz County and Ward and Rose Burroughs of Stanislaus County were the other finalists, all demonstrating that it is possible to run a successful business while staying grounded in the soil that sustains them.

Dino Giacomazzi tends to 900 cows on a dairy established by his great-grandfather, pioneering modern techniques on one of California's oldest dairies.

"My family has been farming and milking cows in this same spot every single day since 1893," Giacomazzi said. "I feel privileged to keep that tradition going so hopefully my children can take it over someday."

The fourth-generation farmer said he hopes to lead the way in terms of sustainability for California dairies. In 2005 he adopted strip tilling, which involves tilling the ground in narrow strips rather than disturbing the entire field. This practice improves water conservation and reduces fuel consumption, diesel emissions and dust.

Giacomazzi has also assumed a leadership role in agricultural communications and outreach, training fellow farmers to use social media to advocate for sustainable agriculture and to communicate with consumers about the vital work farmers and ranchers do.

In addition, he has volunteered to work with several state agencies on a long-term groundwater monitoring system to determine the relationship between dairy operations, waste and nutrient management practices, and groundwater quality.

"A lot of farmers think we're crazy for doing it ... because of some perceived risk, but we do it for that exact reason—because somebody has to do it. Somebody has to tell our story," Giacomazzi said. "My desire to keep this (family business) going and to make it sustainable is greater than my fear of the consequences of being out in front."

Stephen Pedersen and Jeanne Byrne say they relish the opportunity to farm and leave a legacy for others.

"For both of us, it was a need to do something real with our lives," Byrne said. "To be close to our land and have open space and to create a healthy product for people to enjoy were all things that were important to us."

Their 38-acre farm is perched above Harkins Slough just outside Watsonville. In order to protect the sensitive habitat of the slough, the hillsides that lead to it are in a conservation easement and cannot be farmed or developed. The couple has welcomed the abundance of wildlife that resides here and has made it a goal to preserve this critical habitat.

The other half of their property is protected under an agricultural easement, which not only keeps it in farmland and prohibits development, but requires that it be managed organically forever. Here, Pedersen and Byrne, who are first-generation farmers, grow organic fruit, vegetables and flowers and have established their own community-supported agriculture program.

"I truly believe this is what I was meant to do in life," Pedersen said. "All of the challenges we face every day as farmers are actually really rewarding in so many different ways. I can't imagine doing anything else with my life."

Rose and Ward Burroughs co-own a 4,400-acre collection of farms near Denair, where the third-generation farming family has put the principles of land conservation and long-term stewardship into practice with organic dairies, organic and conventional almonds, and an organic egg business.

The Burroughs' cattle receive approximately 80 percent of their nutrition from pasture and forage through a carefully managed grazing method, so they don't overwork any one piece of land. The family also produces more than 300 tons of compost each year to feed their soil, thus enhancing soil biology and ensuring the long-term viability of their farm.

"We're only on this Earth for a short time and in that time, we want to make a difference," Ward Burroughs said.

In addition to producing high-quality organic milk and meat, the pastures also provide a number of ecological benefits, including wildlife habitat for a diverse population of birds and mammals. The couple has even worked with a local biologist to assist with restoration plantings at the ranch to ensure healthy land for future generations.

"The way we farm is not work, but it's our life," Rose Burroughs said. "It's what we eat, live and breathe each day and what we truly believe in."

(Tracy Sellers hosts the California Bountiful television program. She may be contacted at tsellers@cfbf.com.)

[Watch a video](#) of the 2012 Leopold Conservation Award winners and finalists.

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