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Reaching Out

Telling stories to sustain rural communities

by Jesikah Maria Ross, director, Art of Regional Change, University of California, Davis, and Holly George, Plumas and Sierra counties livestock and natural resources farm advisor, University of California Cooperative Extension

A NEW WAY OF TALKING

"In the 21st century, developers, land use planners, ranchers and government officials need to learn from past mistakes, work collectively to pursue common sense legislation and protect the ever dwindling agricultural lands for future generations." – from "Just A Farmer" by **Dave Goicochea**, a Sierra Valley rancher from Loyalton.

The Sierra Valley is the kind of place people imagine when they think of country living: wide open spaces filled with meandering streams, grazing cattle and farm houses along winding two-lane roads. Located in the high Sierra Nevada mountains, between the rapidly growing cities of Truckee and Reno, Nev., this remote area has long been the home of Native American tribes as well as generations of farmers

and ranchers.

Today, this rural community faces challenges from people who question agriculture as the most viable use of the land. Speculative residential development and costly environmental regulations also threaten residents' businesses and way of life.

Greater communication between community members and decision-makers – elected and appointed officials as well as the general public who vote on bonds or with their dollars – could help shape future policies that preserve the community's heritage while protecting agricultural production and natural resources for future generations.

But how do you generate such communication? How do you connect

remote rural residents with each other and to their urban and suburban counterparts? And how do you do it in a way that fosters dialogue and mutual understanding?

Our answer: use digital media to create short personal stories about people's connection to the land and their hopes for the future. Then create forums to share and talk about the stories, surfacing issues, raising awareness and identifying actions that meet shared goals. That's what we're doing through the *Passion for the Land* project (PFL).

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY MEDIA PROJECTS

"Everyone appreciates the open space and rural life style that ranchers and farmers provide. Without water



agriculture would not be sustainable. Wild life habitat would be diminished. So much of the recreation we enjoy would be eliminated. Ranchers without water would be forced to sell, and that would result in losing our rural communities.” – from “Water Worries” by **Cindy Maddalena**, a Sierra Valley rancher from Sierraville

Passion for the Land is a collaborative storytelling project designed to help Sierra Valley residents connect with policymakers, community leaders, educators and the general public about the current challenges of sustaining working landscapes, natural resources and the rural way of life.

The Art of Regional Change is an initiative of the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), Center for Regional Change and the Davis Humanities Institute. A joint effort of Art of Regional Change and University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE), PFL brought ranchers, farmers and community leaders in Sierra Valley together with Extension staff and UC Davis artists and researchers to produce 12 short personal videos that articulate the benefits of agriculture and highlight the dirt-level stewardship practices of the people who call Sierra Valley their home.

The stories are told by the people who work the land – they wrote the scripts and produced the images – and include suggestions for ways California residents and policymakers can work together to create thriving rural economies while stewarding precious natural resources. UCCE staff learned multimedia production skills through the project and together with the Art of Regional Change recorded and edited the pieces.

These place-based stories powerfully communicate land and water conservation values as well as the need to support the economic well-being of those who care for California’s rural places. While these stories are grounded in the Sierra Valley, they speak to questions facing communities throughout rural California:

- How do you balance increasing residential demand in the rural areas with the health of its ecosystems and historic agricultural economies?
- How do you involve those who work the land in shaping water policy and sustainable land use practices at the local and state level?
- How do you foster a land stewardship ethic in the next generation of urban, suburban and rural youth to build long-term support for conserving the rural economic, environmental and cultural resources?

GETTING THE WORD OUT

“Most people nowadays are three to four generations away from production agriculture. The more they know about where their food comes from, the more informed they will be when they go to the ballot box to vote on policies that effect our way of life.” – from “Passing it On” by **Dave and Dorris Goss**, Sierra Valley ranchers from Vinton.

Producing digital media is one thing; making sure the people you want to see and use it is another. That’s why after the videos were produced, the storytellers, project staff and representatives from 10 statewide organizations got together and generated a plan for how to distribute and discuss the stories with audiences who make land use, water policy, conservation and development decisions that impact rural places. This plan includes DVD distribution, social media, public media and face-to-face forums.

To date, 250 DVDs of *Passion for the Land* stories have been given out to regional organizations, state agencies, college departments and high school teachers who are showing the work to diverse constituencies through their websites, conferences, trainings and classrooms.

Some of these groups have also screened and discussed the stories at state and local government meetings (state agencies, planning commission, board of supervisors and ag commissions), while other have donated them to the local video store or public library. The stories are

available online to view, comment on and share via *Passion for the Land*’s YouTube Channel, Blip TV site and Facebook page.

To reach large urban audiences, we are currently creating audio versions of the stories for regional and statewide NPR programs and print versions that can run as op-ed/commentaries in regional newspapers. Perhaps as important for readers of this publication, PFL stories will be featured as part of the California Beef Cattle Improvement Association’s 2010 tour in the Sierra Valley, June 18-20.

We’re still in the middle of the project, but so far it seems that the *Passion for the Land* project has collaboratively produced ground-level stories that have helped inform policymakers about agricultural practices, resource issues and the different benefits ag land provides; given rural residents a greater voice in decisions that directly impact them; and advanced the land grant mission of UC Davis and the UCCE – to conduct research in the public interest and share it with California’s citizens. We continue to look for ways to show and discuss the stories and welcome your suggestions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jesikah Maria Ross is the founding director of the Art of Regional Change, which brings scholars, students and artists together community groups to collaborate on media projects that strengthen communities, generate public scholarship, and inform regional decision-making. She co-directed Passion for the Land and can be reached at jmross@ucdavis.edu.

*Holly George is the county director and livestock and natural resources advisor for UCCE in Plumas-Sierra counties. For the past 25 years, she has assisted ranchers, researchers and policymakers share information, work across divides and find creative solutions to pressing natural resource and land use issues. She co-directed *Passion for the Land* and can be reached at hageorge@ucdavis.edu.*
