

# Passion for the Land

A Collaborative Project to help rural residents share stories about preserving community heritage while protecting agricultural lands & natural resources for future generations

## Is Sustainable Attainable by Gary Romano



Can a small, High Sierra, farmer sustain his family farm in this day and age? Or is it just “Suicide with a Butter Knife!”

My grandfather came to Plumas County in 1907 from Italy, with a dream to be a cattle rancher and a farmer. He bought his first 800 acre ranch along the Middle Fork of the Feather River, in Beckwourth, California for \$1 per acre. His family got through the Great Depression, the boys survived WWII, and after it was all said and done he had accumulated over 3500 acres by 1945.

But times were changing. By 1978, industrial farming was taking over, and the family ranches were disappearing in Sierra Valley. In 1989 my uncle called me fully exhausted, “Do you want to buy the last 65 acres of the farm?” I thought about my childhood growing up in a hardworking Italian family, working every day after school and on weekends at my family’s flower farm in San Jose, California. My parents would say, “You better get good grades and go to college or else you’ll be pulling weeds the rest of your life!”

Did I want to go back to that? I had a successful 17 year career in Parks and Recreation, and did I want to give all that up for an unknown future? To me, it was a no brainer...SOLD, to Gary Romano; OCCUPATION: FARMER.

The old ways of farming were gone. Sierra Valley has one of the shortest growing season in the West. Why it’s said by the old-timers, “All we have in Sierra Valley is July and Winter.” I had to diversify our operation to make a living. Going organic was the niche for us. In addition, my wife Kim & I had to add other farming ventures to sustain the farm. Doing farm tours, Dinners in the Barn, On-farm Farmers Market, and running a Native plant nursery. We even went as far as coming up with an organic bloody mary mix.....” That’s what long winters do to a farmer in Sierra Valley.”

It’s been 20 years, “Robbing Peter to pay Paul” and extending ourselves annually. It’s a constant challenge for small family farms, unlike large industrial farms, there are no subsidies for small farmers. How long can I go on like this? Or am I just prolonging the inevitable....selling the family farm? It would be the last crop I’ll ever sell!

I bought the farm to carry on my FAMILY’S farming heritage here in Sierra Valley, realizing that in order to survive as a small farmer “I couldn’t put all my eggs in one basket.” With this in mind....I ask our local politicians and policy makers... “Remember that Asphalt and Concrete can not be used as a Cover Crop, and that all land left fallow or as open space can always be farmed...and that asphalt and concrete is a one-time crop that can’t be reversed.”



In the end...Sustainability comes from the heart of the farmer. My passion to continue farming comes from within. To THIS farmer, being Sustainable is always Attainable.

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Project  
Co-Directors

**Holly George**, 530/283-6270, [hageorge@ucdavis.edu](mailto:hageorge@ucdavis.edu)  
UC Cooperative Extension, Plumas-Sierra Counties, 208 Fairgrounds Road, Quincy, CA 95971

**jesikah maria ross**, 530/320-1819, [jmross@ucdavis.edu](mailto:jmross@ucdavis.edu)  
UC Davis Art of Regional Change, Davis Humanities Institute, One Shield Ave, Davis, CA 95616

[artofregionalchange.ucdavis.edu](http://artofregionalchange.ucdavis.edu)

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