

# 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*

## Keeping People on the Land by Holly George



Up in the High Sierra, not far from Reno and Truckee is a hidden treasure. As the local Farm Advisor for University of California Cooperative Extension, I've had the honor to interact with the amazing, hardworking and fun-loving people of Sierra Valley for over twenty years. The people in agriculture are the golden threads that hold the fabric of our rural communities together. But, we're at risk of losing these gems...if we don't stop the piecemeal erosion of our agricultural land base and the continuous whittling of farmers and ranchers rights to produce food and fiber, care for the land and make a decent living. We need to consider people as a key component in our economic development and land use planning efforts.

Most of us don't think about our connection to AG and all the things the land and the people who work it provide. The food you eat and the clothes you pull out of your closet come from agriculture. They supply things that most of us take for granted--like amazing habitat for wildlife, tons of recreational opportunities, a place for rivers to spread out and reduce flooding, plus breathtaking views that are enjoyed by locals and visitors. The public pays little for these amenities and in most cases doesn't know that private landowners are responsible for them, stewarding them at their own expense. But people in ag face increasing costly regulations, narrow profit margins and the impacts of unpredictable weather. We have no control over the weather; but if we truly value the rural character of our counties then we need to figure ways to make it economically viable for these people to stay on the land. Otherwise, they leave and what do we get? Ranchettes with absentee gentleman ranchers, resort developments populated part time, and more golf courses. Pasturelands aren't placeholders for development. Absentee landowners can add to our communities; but rarely are they the foundation and they don't usually coach soccer, organize school functions or serve on the volunteer fire department. Too often, ranchettes become weedettes.

We continue to enact cumbersome legislation and pile on expensive one-size fits all regulations often in the name of sustainability or protecting the environment...with little or no regard for the people. People are key to ag sustainability and keeping them on the land is as important as saving plants and animal or fighting invasive species.

I think Agriculture sustainability is a shared responsibility. Farmers and ranchers must practice good stewardship. People who vote and donate money need to become better educated about the impacts their decisions have on the people as well as our resources. Policy makers must value the part people play in our communities and then work towards creating 'win-win' solutions to ensure they and the lands they watch over will be here for all of us to enjoy for years to come.

The people in agriculture, the lands they work and our livelihoods are undeniably linked.

I think, "Our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors." We need realistic policies that acknowledge the contributions the people in ag make on the land and in our neighborhoods verses creating more restrictive regulations forcing them from the land and destroying the rural quality of our counties. Get to know these people, invest your money in conservation easements of working lands and cast your votes to support viable local ag production and processing practices.

In the Big Picture, WE...landowners, policy makers and voters...are temporary 'caretakers' of the land. As you think about your legacy, remember people are part of the sustainability equation.



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