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California Ag Producers, Business Cooperate To Fight Overregulation

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The Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business Organization (CoLAB) represents ag producers in Ventura County, CA. This organization was formed three years ago to protect the agriculture industry in a county that neighbors Los Angeles County. The local regulation within Ventura County was pushing agriculture businesses out of the county. A veterinarian who returned to his ranching roots, Bud Sloan is the president of Ventura County CoLAB.

According to an article on *Beef* by Burt Rutherford:

Sloan served a term as second vice president for the California Cattlemen's Association and was on the program at a meeting where he heard a presentation from the Santa Barbara CoLAB, which stands for Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business. "I was there to speak, but I got the better end of the deal because it gave me the idea that this could be an organization that fills a niche that no other organization was filling, especially on regulatory and land use issues."

The southern border of Ventura County butts up to Los Angeles County. You wouldn't think a coastal county in California that close to huge metro area like Los Angeles would support ag production. However, agriculture in Ventura County is a \$2 billion economic engine that supports many other businesses, and creates 35,000 jobs as they supply the goods and services to ranchers and a remarkable variety of field and tree crops.

However, as the affluent of L.A. gravitated to more rural areas to escape urban problems, Ventura County changed. "As they came out here, they saw the open spaces and they wanted to keep it that way," Sloan says.

How they've gone about it, however, has a downside effect, by creating a crushing regulatory environment that makes it nearly impossible for ag producers to stay in business.

"Our Ventura County CoLAB actually started out of frustration," says Sloan, who serves as the group's president. "It was frustration with our county government and the pressures they were putting on us."

Among those pressures was a county ordinance called SOAR – Save our Agricultural Resources. Judging by the name, Sloan says the ordinance seemed positive. Instead, what it did was give county planners complete authority over any land use decision made anywhere in the county.

“If you changed the intensification of the land in any way, you had to go before the population with a special election that you paid for,” Sloan explains. “Whether it was unintended consequences or not, it put pressure on agriculture, whether it was cattle, strawberries, row crops, tree farming, whatever. It narrowed us with biological constraints.”

No longer could a cattleman clear brush from his pastures, or a strawberry farmer improve the productivity of his fields. “It essentially turned a \$50,000 equipment shed into a \$500,000 project,” Sloan says.

That’s when the rub between Ventura County’s ag and urban communities became glaringly evident. “Ranching and farming is a business. It’s not someone’s view shed, it’s not someone’s open space; it’s somebody’s property that they’re trying to make a living on,” he says.

And that’s when the newly formed CoLAB went to work. “We went to battle with the planning department,” Sloan says. “We found 21 points we felt were critical. Over about a six-month period, at a cost of about \$115,000 for biologists and attorneys, we won 19 of the 21 points.”

They won, he says, with science, logic and using the law to their advantage. “And that’s been our motto ever since. We want to do things on an up-and-up way. No backroom politics. It’s a matter of presenting the data, presenting the legal ramifications and how it will affect the economy of Ventura County.” And they’re non-partisan. “We leave our politics at the door and we talk about the issues.”

In its three short years, the effort has notched several successes by being pragmatic, says Lynn Jensen, Ventura County CoLAB executive director, and by recognizing that often a victory is negotiating reasonable regulations.

“I think one of the reasons we’re successful is we have partners in everything we do,” she says. Many of the ag commodities have county organizations, but those groups don’t have the resources individually to fight the county. Pooling resources through CoLAB, they do. Then, she says, they do their homework, understand the details, and come prepared.

“We get into the details with our partners, and we try to negotiate regulations so they’re reasonable and don’t put cattlemen out of business,” she says. “There’s an economic impact to all these regulations, and I think sometimes they don’t recognize that it’s the successful businesses that pay for all this government.”

Beyond that, Jensen keeps a high profile. “I monitor the county Board of Supervisors (county commissioners) every week. And I attend a huge number of meetings of different groups that are trying to promote certain agendas. And in some cases, they don’t recognize they’re being detrimental to certain businesses and that a lot of times, there’s no real reason (for the regulations they’re trying to push). We can work it out.”

[Click here](#) to read more about how Ventura County CoLAB is working.

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