



California Ag Producers, Business Cooperate To Fight Overregulation

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An organization called the Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business Organization (CoLAB) serves as “boots on the ground” for ag producers and businesses in a California county.

It began out of frustration. In just three years, however, it has channeled frustration into effectiveness for ag producers and other businesses in Ventura County, CA, as they deal with a crushing load of local [regulations](#) that threaten to put them out of business.

And the sparkplug behind it is Bud Sloan, a veterinarian who returned to his ranching roots and wants his grandsons to have the same opportunity.

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.

Strawberry fields forever

“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.”

Regulation happens

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.”

Ventura County CoLAB is a membership organization and the money comes from dues and fundraisers. “We have 300 members throughout Ventura County,” Sloan says, “and there are another 1,000 out there who are in agriculture and don’t know we’re here yet.” About 85% of the membership is ag producers, Jensen says, but as the name suggests, the group works on any issue that affects jobs and the business environment in the county.

Now that they’ve established themselves as a reputable, straightforward and formidable player in the county regulatory bureaucracy, Ventura County CoLAB is working to increase its profile throughout the county, with rural and urban residents alike.

According to Sloan, their [outreach program](#) includes newspaper op-eds and programs at service clubs, such as Kiwanis and Rotary. The goal is to educate and inform.

“City folks tend to not understand the difficulties of agriculture,” Sloan says. “It’s the same story over and over again; we have to educate them, we have to bring the science to them, we have to bring the law to them, and hopefully we will prevail,” he says. “Unfortunately,

we're about 15 years behind the forces that are after us. We're catching up fast, but it's been a real struggle."

Bringing it home

Sloan and Jensen say the CoLAB concept can work in any county where agriculture is facing an increasingly urban and regulation-happy government. "It just takes the will to do it," Sloan says. "If you have the will, and frustration is what you're thinking when walking through the doors of that county administrative office, then it's time."

He uses himself as an example. "What I did for the last 30 years was keep my head down and try to dodge the bullets coming at me," Sloan says. "I didn't want to get involved, and I don't want to now. But I realize I have to."

He's the third [generation](#) of his family to operate the ranch, which dates back to a Spanish land grant. The fourth and fifth generations are living on the ranch.

"I've got grandsons who are 10 years old, and they got two cows in their cattle company," he says. "If I don't do this now, if our generation and the generation right behind us don't get involved, we're going to have to accept what's coming down the pike, and we may not be here to carry on."