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Farmers battle labor shortages, SOAR as they look to future

Ventura County's farmers are reshaping the landscape for agribusiness, and in the process they are redrawing the county's political map.

This traditionally Republican group is breaking sharply with Tea Party conservatives and embracing comprehensive immigration reform.



HENRY DUBROFF
Editor

And they are breaking ranks with their former allies in the environmental movement to back Gov. Jerry Brown's Sacramento Delta water diversion project.

Finally, while their ranks are still dominated by large, hyper-efficient producers reaching national and global

markets, they are finding room to embrace the farm-to-table movement, organics and a new wave of crop technology.

That was my takeaway after sitting through the County's Resource Conservation District's fourth annual luncheon, where some of the top

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players in agriculture talked frankly about labor, water and the changes coming to some of the world's most productive farming operations.

Field crop grower Edgar Terry said that his operations are "40 percent short on labor" and that skilled workers are simply not available due to immigration restrictions. "Labor is not a pricing issue," he said, adding that skilled workers are simply not available under the current rules.

Tomato farmer Casey Houweling, a Canadian who operates a state-of-the-art greenhouse operation near Camarillo, said Canada is gaining a competitive advantage because of its labor permits for agriculture.

Henry Gonzales, Ventura County's agriculture commissioner, said the problem could get worse as a nascent housing recovery siphons off the small pool of available workers, especially in the Central Valley. "I fear the housing recovery will pull workers out of farm work and into construction," he told an audience of about 250 at the Nov. 12 program at Crowne Plaza Ventura Beach.

In the 1990s, the environmental movement and agribusiness formed an alliance that passed the series of land-use restrictions known as Save Our Agricultural Resources, or SOAR. But farmers feel they got the short end of that bargain and they are vocally pushing back.

Storm-water runoff rules and land-use restrictions are driving up costs and limiting their ability to provide farm-worker housing and labor-saving solutions such as robotic

strawberry pickers are years in the future.

Meanwhile, persistent drought and salt water intrusion into the Oxnard plain has created a consensus around supporting Gov. Jerry Brown's multibillion-dollar plan to divert some of the Sacramento Delta's plentiful supplies to Southern California.

Rancher Bud Sloan said that relying on rainfall has become a losing proposition. "The last 13 years have had 10 years of drought," he said adding that he now allocates 35 acres per head of cattle up from 20 acres just a decade ago.

Houweling and United Water Conservation District chief Mike Solomon called on leadership at the state and federal level to push through projects that will open new water supplies and provide longer-term fixes to the salt water intrusion problem.

"We need to stir every pot," Solomon said.

When it came to handing out hardware, however, the district gurus didn't pick one of their global agribusiness titans.

Instead, they gave their Excellence in Agricultural Stewardship award to McGrath family maverick Phil McGrath, who has lead the movement toward farm-to-table agriculture and embraced organics as a pathway to a more sustainable future.

In a tearful moment, McGrath graciously dedicated his award to his late cousin, Tom, a more conventionally-minded grower who passed away last month after battling cancer.

"You can't be a bad farmer in Ventura County" and survive in the business for very long, Phil McGrath said. Politicians looking to their own futures should take note.

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