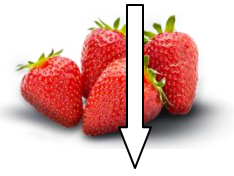


Agricultural Uncertainty Complicates Land-Use Planning

by John Krist

Since 2013, strawberry acreage in Ventura County has declined 34 percent, from 13,555 acres in 2013 to 9,004 in 2016, according to the California Strawberry Commission.



The relatively swift and substantial change in acreage devoted to the county's highest-grossing crop is the result of a variety of factors: thinning profit margins due to increasing labor, land and water costs; a shift of production north to Santa Maria and south to Baja as growers seek cheaper land and more reliable water; depressed prices because overplanting upset the balance between supply and demand.



Change of this sort is nothing new. The history of Ventura County agriculture is a 150-year story of adaptation to evolving circumstances. But today, Ventura County agriculture faces more sources of profound uncertainty — the kind that can trigger changes in fundamental structural elements of the industry—than at any other time in recent memory. In such an environment, it is risky to assume that what agriculture here looks like today tells us much of anything about what it will look like tomorrow, a year from now or two decades from now.

This is perhaps the biggest disconnect between agricultural reality and the aspirational vision embodied by competing growth-control initiatives on the November ballot. Although each provides some minor exceptions, Save Open-space and Agricultural Resources and SUSTAIN VC both impose the substantial hurdle of voter approval before farmland can be converted to urban uses for a very long time — 34 years for SOAR, 20 years for the alternative. Implicit in those extremely long planning horizons is an assumption that farming's current footprint in Ventura County can and will remain basically unchanged over that span, and that potential erosion of the industry's economic fundamentals can be mitigated.

Like the organization I work for, I hope that is so. But achieving that stability will depend on the industry's ability to overcome some daunting challenges, particularly in the realms of pest pressure and water supply.



Permanent tree crops, for example, account for just over 40 percent of the county's harvested acreage and have long provided a steadying, long-term counterbalance to the short-term volatility of vegetable and berry production. Yet citrus producers are facing a pest-disease complex that, absent a scientific breakthrough in treatment or resistance, could drive many of them out of business in 10 to 15 years. Avocado growers face a similarly unstoppable pest-disease complex that, while not as likely to cause wholesale destruction of orchards, will at the very least seriously compromise productivity and profit margins.



Compliance with the state's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act requires bringing basin pumping into balance with recharge by 2040 or 2042, depending on conditions. For some of the basins underlying the Oxnard Plain — home to more than half the county's irrigated acres —this could require a 25 to 30 percent reduction in use by that deadline.

Unless new supply is tapped to offset that, growers may find the only way to meet the pending restrictions is to fallow more than 10,000 acres of berry and vegetable ground.

We all hope that none of these grim scenarios come to pass, that the farmers and ranchers of Ventura County will overcome these challenges with the kind of innovation, adaptation, creativity and collaboration that have long characterized the industry. But if some of them fail, and there simply is no longer an economically viable model for farming some of that acreage, it is difficult to see how even the most well-intentioned set of land-use regulations can keep it in agriculture.



— John Krist is chief executive officer of Farm Bureau of Ventura County.